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THERE WAS NO CLATTER TO THE HOOFS OF HIS JET BLACK STEED, ONLY
A MUFFLED SOUND.

OR,

The Specter Soldier of the Overland.

A Companion Story to "Butterfly
Billy's Man-Hunt."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUTTERFLY BILLY, THE PONY
RIDER DETECTIVE," "BROTHERS IN BUCK-
SKIN," "BILLY BLUE-EYES," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAPPER'S STORY.

A PARTY of United States Cavalry had ridden
into a small clump of timber to camp for the
night, when they found there a man dressed in
buckskin, and with long gray hair and beard.

He had just built a fire, for the night was com-
ing on chilly, and a deer hung upon sticks in a

tree had just been butchered preparatory to broiling some of the steaks for the hunter's supper.

"You is welcome, loot'nent, more than welcome ter my camp, and here is deer meat, a wild turkey lyin' yonder, thet spring hev water cool as ice, and thar is pickin' in plenty fer ther critters.

"I allus did like ther Boys in Blue, so jist make yerselves welcome, all of ye."

The lieutenant, a handsome young officer with an inexpressible sad face, yet one that was handsome and striking, responded pleasantly to the hunter's invitation and said:

"We were not so fortunate as to kill a deer, so will accept your invitation and share provisions, so we can have a fine supper."

So the score of cavalry, returning from a scouting expedition under their gallant young officer, were soon assembled about the camp-fires enjoying a hearty meal.

When supper was over, the lieutenant lighted a cigar, and sitting upon his blanket bed leaned back against a tree in the full enjoyment of a comfortable smoke, while the soldiers, with their pipes, gathered around the old hunter, whom the scout along with the cavalry squad recognized as a one-time famous guide.

What was said around the camp-fire all listened to with interest, for the scout had hinted that the old trapper could tell strange and thrilling stories of wild border life if he so wished.

"Say, Pard Bruin Bill, what made you ever give up ther trails as a guide, for yer were about ther best in Texas?" asked the scout, calling the hunter by his name of Bruin Bill, a name which he had won in early life as a successful bear-hunter.

"Pard, I hain't talked o' my reasons for leavin' off guidin' ter any one, fer it kinder chokes my heart all up ter speak of it; but I don't mind givin' you the truth ter-night as we is all sittin' here friendly like, yer know."

"I give up ther trails and tuck ter trappin' fer pelts and huntin', 'cause somehow I didn't want ter form no more friendships, no more 'tachments in life, and ef I lived alone ter myself in ther woods, then thar was nobody fer me ter love, yer see."

"You have been unfortunate in your love affairs then?" said the sergeant, who was the fort dandy, and supposed that the old trapper referred to his lady loves having been unfaithful.

"Yas, I has, for my brother come to Texas with me from old Kentucky, and ther blasted Mexicans shot him down by my side one day; but I took his body away and made him a grave over in the hills, and my cabin are near it, so I doesn't feel so lonesome arter all, for I has my horse and two dogs."

"Arter livin' in Texas for a dozen years I went back to my old home to see ther old folks, and Lord bless your souls, pard, they was both sleepin' in ther village churchyard, and my sister had got married and moved away, and when I went ter see her, she was that rich and fashionable she didn't seem ther same, so I come back here and turned guide."

"I guided a lot o' emigrants across ther country one time, and tuk a shine to one o' ther gals, as she did ter me; but ther Comanches swooped down on me one night and them as wasn't kilt jist lit out for ther old homes ag'in and my gal went along too, and when I went arter her she was jist dyin' with consumption, so that was a funeral instead of a wedding."

"So it went on until one day I were guidin' a party across ther prairies, and they was ther nicest folks I ever seen."

"Thar was a gent and his wife, and I tell yer they was the decentist folks I ever seen, and I never could understand why they was a-emigrating."

"They was from the South, and had along with 'em two sons and a darter, three colored sarvints and ther finest outfit in wagons, horses and sich I ever see cross ther pararers."

"I tell yer, pards, I loved every darned one of 'em, even to ther niggers, and ther leetle girl were jist sweeter than any pararer flower I ever seen."

"They was a happy party, too, and was makin' plans ahead as to what they was goin' ter do in ther new home."

"One arternoon ther pretty leetle gal got lost, for she were niissin' from the train."

"She had ridden off in chase of a baby deer, and night come on, so she got lost, and that, too, with signs of Injuns seen around all day."

"I tell yer we went inter camp, and all was nigh crazy."

"It come on ter storm, and next mornin' ther gal war nowhar ter be seen, so I sot out ter find her."

"But, Lord love yer, I never did, and when I come back to ther train it were in ashes, and thar were ther bodies, eight in number, all half-burnt, in ther fire."

"Ther poor leetle gal must hev come in, as ther was eight bodies, yer see, though they was burned so I couldn't tell 'em apart, and ther Comanches had rushed upon ther train and done ther red work only too sudden."

"Waal, pards, it tarded my brain mad, for I didn't know nothin' fer some time, and went a-rovin' around about ther kentry aimless like."

"I suppose I kilt game, cooked it and eated when I were hungry, and slept when I were sleepy; but it were a blank ter me, them few weeks, and maybe it was better so, for it kept me from bein' ill, I guesses."

"Waal, I at last come ter myself in ther mountains one day."

"I were afoot, had no horse, and whar he went no one knows, I guesses, as I doesn't."

"I hed a wound in my shoulder, and it were made with a arrer, showin' Injun work—but I didn't recommender no fight I was in—but as thar was a fresh scalp hangin' ter my belt, I is jist sart'in some Injun and me had a fallin' out."

"I were not a healthy-lookin' pictur', ter be sure, and so I levanted for my old cabin, arter givin' up tryin' ter track myself over my wanderings."

"I got thar all safe, and when I looked at myself in a piece o' a lookin'-glass I had thar, why, I were a different man, for, my hair and beard was gray, as yer sees it now, and I are only thirty-seven now, pards."

"I spruced up best I could, and went afoot to ther scene o' ther massacre, and some good man hed been thar and buried ther dead folks, God bless him, and my last good friend were dead, for I did love them Ashley folks same as I did my own flesh and blood."

"Ashley! Ashley, did you say, trapper? My name is Arthur Ashley, and every one I loved was killed by Comanches, as your story says," and the young cavalry officer suddenly confronted the trapper before the camp-fire.

CHAPTER II.

A SCOUT HAS SOMETHING TO SAY.

THE soldiers and all were startled by the sudden, excited manner of their young officer, who in the deadliest danger had never been known to show any sign of excitement.

It was very evident that the story told by the old trapper had so deeply moved him.

The latter turned his gaze upon the officer, and rising from his seat asked in a low, slow tone:

"Are your name Ashley?"

"It is, so when was it that you guided the Ashley train into Texas?"

Unheeding the question the trapper asked:

"You came into Texas along with folks as was massacred?"

"Yes."

"What were the name o' your guide?"

"Buckskin Bill, we called him."

"You is Arthur Ashley, then, for I sees it now in your face?"

"I am Arthur Ashley."

"God bless yer, boy! I ar' Buckskin Bill yer guide, and I grasps your hand as that of a dead man back from the grave."

It was a strange, a pathetic meeting there between the young officer and the trapper, and the men were also deeply moved by the scene, as the two grasped each other's hand in a silence that was far more impressive than words would have been.

At last the young lieutenant said:

"I also believed you dead, Buckskin Bill."

"No, yer recomembers I went arter yer sister?"

"Yes, I did also, and when I returned the Indians had done their red work."

"I fought them, as best I coula, but was wounded and made prisoner, and they carried me to their village."

"But you saw all?"

"Oh, yes, I saw the bodies of my parents and others in the flames, and though I could not distinguish them apart, it seemed that I saw yours and my sister's, so believed that you had returned with her to meet a fearful fate."

"I was carried by the red-skins, as I said, to their village, suffering untold agony from my four wounds, and at last given over to one of their medicine-men to make me well so that I could be tortured to death."

"The Comanches were plotting a grand move upon the Rose Valley settlement and Fort Blank, and the old medicine-man who had me in charge, spoke English and gloated over what the braves would do, telling me that I must

hurry to get well to meet the many prisoners they would bring back for torture."

"He knew I was in a condition threatening to end my life; but I pretended to be worse than I really was, and one night I killed him, took his rig and his horse and set out for the settlements."

"The braves had started late that evening, and I knew the Indians would not go to the medicine-man's tepee without his calling them there, so I felt safe from pursuit."

"I rode hard, but soon had to tie myself upon the horse, I was so weak."

"The old medicine chief had told me with pride that his horse was a superb animal, captured from the colonel commanding the fort, and none better was on the plains, and this I discovered to be the truth."

"I gave the superb beast his rein and he went along at a swift pace and directly toward the settlements."

"It was before dawn when he went up to the stockade gate of the fort, and as I did not halt at the command of the sentinel, having become unconscious from weakness and suffering, he fired upon me, wounding me in the shoulder."

"The alarm was given and I was soon in the surgeon's hands, while my horse was completely fagged out."

"Within an hour I was revived enough to tell my story, that the Indians were to come in a small force and negotiate for peace by day, and at night their whole force was to sweep down upon the fort and settlements."

"Then I relapsed into unconsciousness, and it was four months before I was able to leave my bed; but I was told how the plotters had been captured, and the attacking party at night, expecting to surprise their foes, had been themselves surprised and terribly whipped."

"When I recovered I found that a general request had been made to the President to appoint me to a second lieutenantancy in the army, and so it is, my dear old friend, Buckskin Bill, that you find me here now in command of a cavalry squad."

Such was the story of the young lieutenant, and after the trapper had commented upon it, the scout Buckskin Sam said in a voice of much earnestness:

"Lieutenant, I heard of the massacre of the Ashley train people, some time after it occurred, for I was Greaser hunting then in Mexico; but I never knew that you were one of the party."

"Yes, Sam, my whole family were slain there, so I have had many to mourn for, much to hate the Comanches for, as you now know, and if men have called me cruel toward red-skins, Heaven knows I have reason for being."

"But them extra folks in ther train thet I seen, who was they?" asked the trapper.

"There were my parents, my brother and sister and three servants, seven in all who were slain."

"I seen eight bodies, Lootnent Arthur."

"Perhaps an Indian I killed may have been of the number."

"May be, but it hain't likely, unless they hadn't time to bury him and so let him burn ter ashes."

"Lieutenant," and the scout spoke in a strangely thoughtful mood.

"Yes, Sam."

"Did you not say that you thought Bill here had returned with your sister?"

"Yes."

"But he had not, he says, for he failed to find her."

"My God! Buckskin Sam, you speak the truth."

"What in the name of God became of my poor sister?" and Lieutenant Ashley was deeply moved, while Trapper Bill remarked in a voice that quivered:

"It are so, for if you didn't find her, and I didn't, she was not found, and so what was her fate?"

"Lieutenant, I do not wish to raise false hopes: but if a surgeon were to examine the skeleton remains in the graves where the massacre of the train took place, he could tell with his knowledge of anatomy just who were buried there, whether there were Indians along with the others."

"Yes, Sam, and I will ask the fort surgeon to go with me to the spot, for as you say the bones would show my parents and young brothers' remains from those of the Indians, if any, and three negroes."

"Yes, sir, and that is not all."

"Not all, Sam?"

"No, sir, for as I said, I do not care to raise false hopes, but if the graves do not show that your sister found her way back to the fort, or

with some one else whom she met, and shared the fate with the rest, then I will take you to where a man lives who found a young girl on the prairie I have heard, and made her his wife, and I may be mistaken, but I think her name was Ashley."

CHAPTER III.

WHAT A GRAVE REVEALED.

"TELL me, Buckskin Sam, tell me all that you know, and if it be my sister, alive and well, I will be the happiest man on the soil of Texas, this night," and the lieutenant turned to the scout, who said:

"As I told you, lieutenant, I don't wish to excite false hopes; but I'll tell you all I know."

"I met some time ago, a man whose remarkable appearance at once attracted me."

"He was a ranchero, and had come to Texas some years ago, and brought with him a negro servant who was like his master a giant in size."

"The ranchero is six feet five in height, I believe, is a perfect form, with massive broad shoulders and a face that is both handsome, fearless and determined."

"He made him a home far on the border, in one of the advanced settlements, and it was said that he found a girl on the prairie one day, whose people had been killed by Comanches, and sent her to school for several years."

"Then he went after her and married her, so the story goes, and it strikes me that my informant told me that her name was Ashley, but I may be mistaken, lieutenant."

"Still, when you know what those graves contain, I will guide you to the home of the Prairie Hercules, as the boys call the ranchero, and you will soon know if his wife is your sister or not."

"I know whar ther Hercules is, or about ther neighborhood, fer I has heard o' him, Sam; so let me guide ther lieutenant, ef it's all ther same ter you, fer I has told yer that I knowed her, an' as I went on ther s'arch fer her thet awful day, I'd like ter find her."

"All right, Bruin Bill; I will be glad to yield, especially as I wished to ask a few weeks' leave when I got back to the fort, to run up to San Antonio and see my old pards," responded Buckskin Sam.

Then the party retired to their blankets to sleep for the night, all except Arthur Ashley, whose brain and heart were too full of hope and fear to allow slumber to come to his eyes.

Before dawn the troop was on its way, a led horse being given to Bruin Bill, and late that afternoon they reached the fort; but the dawn of the next day saw Arthur Ashley at the head of a dozen fresh troopers, and accompanying him was Surgeon Renforth, who went to examine the bones in the grave where the massacre of the Ashley train had taken place.

Buckskin Bill, as the lieutenant still called the trapper, went as guide, and his devotion to Arthur Ashley was really touching.

He spoke to him in a tone of deepest respect, and seemed to feel for him as though he suffered with him the hopes and fears about his sister, the dread that a short while would tell him the fate of all of those who had been his kindred.

The camp in the timber was reached at sunset, and the escort at once picketed out the horses and built a fire.

Then Lieutenant Ashley walked over toward the graves, and as he did so Buckskin Bill set to work to spread his blankets for him and make him comfortable.

There was no joking around the camp-fire that night, and the men sat about as though awed into silence by the surroundings, and the memory of the fearful massacre that had occurred there.

They seemed to feel the deepest sympathy for their young commander, while Surgeon Renforth had always regarded him with the warmest friendship.

A couple of pack-horses had been brought along, with shovels, spades and stores, so that the party could make themselves very comfortable.

All retired early, and the night passed in deepest quiet; but with the first glimmer of dawn they were up, and after breakfast set to work digging into the graves.

The iron-work of the wagons and ambulances of the train, twisted out of shape by the fire that had consumed them, were removed from the large, common grave into which all the bodies had been placed.

Surgeon Renforth arranged a blanket near for his work, and when the first body was unearthed it was brought to him.

The flesh had crumbled to ashes, and the bones

alone remained, and after a few moments Surgeon Renforth said:

"I take this to have been your father, Ashley."

The young officer stood by with folded arms and uncovered head, gazing down reverently upon the sacred dust.

"Yes?" he said, inquiringly.

"And this is your mother's body, and they were buried side by side by some kindly hand."

"Yes? Heaven bless the one who did the kindly act," was the low reply.

"This is the body of a boy of seventeen, I should think," the surgeon said, as the third body was laid before him.

"A boy?"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly."

"I am satisfied, then."

"It was my brother, younger than I, but a couple of years older than my sister."

"The next, please?" and the young officer seemed to be anxious indeed, for as the remains of his parents and brother had been found side by side, showing that some friendly hand had placed them in their graves, the next to be taken out must be his sister—if she also had fallen a victim to the cruel Comanches.

The fourth body was placed by the side of the others and almost immediately the skilled anatomist said:

"These are the remains of a negro woman."

"Ah! Old Aunt Patience, poor old soul," said the officer.

"And these are the bones of a negro also, a man, and these of a boy."

"Also a negro?" quickly asked the lieutenant.

"Yes, there is no mistaking them from the whites to one who knows their peculiarities."

"Yes, and that accounts for all but my sister."

"Yes, Lieutenant Arthur, for you and I are here, and there were nine of us, you remember," said Buckskin Bill, who suddenly dropped his border dialect.

"Yes, nine of us with you, Bill."

"But the other is to be accounted for—my sister!"

"And there are two more bodies."

These were brought to the surgeon, and as quickly as he had read the difference between the whites and blacks, he now discovered the bones under inspection to be of neither of the two other races.

"This is an Indian, Ashley—yes, and this one, too, and both were men."

"Thank God!" came from the lips of Arthur Ashley, and then he stepped quickly to the open grave.

"No more?"

"No, sir."

"You are sure?"

"Yes; these eight are all."

"Then my sister was not slain," he said, in a voice full of meaning.

"No, Ashley, she is not here, so you must go with Buckskin Bill to see if the wife of the Hercules is she."

"Yes, Renforth," and turning to the soldiers, he continued:

"My men, I thank you from my heart for your noble work, and I am going to ask you to bury the Indians in the grave you have just opened; but my parents and brother, and the three negroes, I must ask you to dig other graves for, in a spot apart from this?"

The men were anxious to obey, and by noon the remains were all again buried, the parents and brother of Arthur Ashley in a separate grave, the negroes not far away, and the redskins were left to the spot from which they had been taken.

After dinner Surgeon Renforth and the men started on the return for the fort, while Arthur Ashley, with Buckskin Bill as a guide, continued on toward the home of the Prairie Hercules.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HOME OF THE HERCULES RANCHERO.

A TEXAS ranch, pleasantly situated upon a rise on the swelling prairie, with a stream running near, and sheltered by fine old trees, looked the picture of contentment for those who had found a home there.

The cabin, commodious and comfortable, the outbuildings showing thrift, and a well-to-do look upon all, with cattle by the hundred, and a large herd of ponies upon the prairies, presented a scene of real life on the border that holds a fascination for so many bold-hearted men.

But a rumor of Comanches on the war-trail changed the peaceful scene in this home, for the

cattle and ponies were driven away to a securer pasturage, the master of the ranch, a captain of Rangers, took the trail of the red-skins with his gallant men, and far away toward the Rio Grande threw himself between the danger threatening and the homes of the settlers.

A Mexican cowboy acted as scout about the ranch, for there had been left two persons, the wife of the Mexican, and the mistress of the house.

She was the wife of the Ranger Hercules, and a beautiful woman indeed she was—beautiful in face, form and character.

Young, for she seemed scarcely out of her teens, intelligent, and a perfect housewife, she was calculated to make the home of any man a happy one.

And there she dwelt, happy in the love of the man whose wife she was.

Seated upon the rustic piazza that ran along the front of the cabin, was Ellen Soulette, the wife of the Prairie Hercules.

She was dressed in a neatly-fitting homespun suit that fitted her faultless form to perfection, and the wealth of red-bronze hair was fastened in a heavy coil at the back of her head, a few stray ringlets, however, escaping and clustering about her temples.

She was engaged in embroidering with beads a pistol-belt and holsters for her husband, and looking up from her work her eyes fell upon two horsemen coming across the prairie.

With a glad cry she sprung to her feet, for who could it be coming toward Ranch Eden but her husband?

A second glance, however, showed her that she was mistaken, that one was in the uniform of an officer, the other clad in buckskin.

At once her thoughts turned upon an officer whose command had camped near the ranch some months before, and who had taken a great fancy to her, so much so that the jealous nature of her husband was aroused.

"I am sorry he is coming when Sol is away, for poor dear fellow he is so jealous, that husband of mine."

"It is his only fault, though, and I can readily put up with that, and not give him cause for jealousy."

She took a field-glass from the rack and turned it upon the horsemen, and, after a minute, continued:

"Yes, it must be Captain Rupert, for the leading horseman looks like him, and the other is a scout from the fort, evidently."

"I only wish that Sol was here."

The strangers were not long in reaching the yard gate of the ranch, and riding up to the rack, they were about to hitch their horses, when a negro man, a perfect giant in size, and as black as ebony, approached and said:

"I'll take yer horses, gemmans, and Missy Ellen is yonder on de piazzy."

"Thank you my man; but look straight into my face and tell me who it is that I remind you of?" said Arthur Ashley, and he confronted the negro squarely.

"Waal, massa, yer does look like Missy Ellen, I declar', for yer has de same eyes, de same hair and you is like her fer a fact."

"Yes, I am her brother, whom she has long looked upon as dead; but where is your master, my man?"

"He am off on de war-trail arter de Comanches, sah, and I just come back this mornin' from having taken de cattle over de hills away from de red Injuns."

In the mean time while the young lieutenant was talking to Sampson, the black giant and comrade of the ranchero, as well as his man of all work, the trapper, Buckskin Bill, had slipped from his horse and made his way to the piazza.

Ellen Soulette had risen from her chair at his approach and gazed fixedly at him.

Memory was taking her back, at sight of his face, to years ago, when he was the guide of her father's train.

True, he was a young man then, and now his hair and beard were gray; but she knew that the man before her was Buckskin Bill the guide, or his father, so striking was the resemblance to the man she had known so well.

"Oh, sir, are you, can you be—"

"Your old pard the guide, Miss Ellen, Buckskin Bill, whom the red-skins never got hold of, and I've found you at last."

She sprung toward him with a glad cry, and grasped both his hands, while she said with voice broken from deep emotion:

"Thank God you too escaped as I did, for I have mourned you as dead with the others, my parents and brothers."

"It was a terrible butchery, Miss Ellen, but

not so bad as you think, for by being lost you escaped. I went to look for you and got away too, and your brother Arthur also—"

"My brother Arthur! Oh! tell me that he too is alive, Buckskin Bill, tell me it, won't you, and I'll never forget you."

"I do tell you so, for do you see this handsome young officer here coming up the steps?"

The guide said no more, for in a shriek came the words:

"Brother Arthur!"

She had thrown herself forward in the utter abandon of joy and was caught in Arthur Ashley's strong arms.

Buckskin Bill found tears in his eyes for the first time in many a long year, and he slipped away after Sampson who had led the horses to the stable.

When he returned half an hour after he found the brother and sister seated together, hand in hand, and each had heard the story of the other, of how they had escaped massacre and the events subsequently happening to them.

"And it was through dear old Buckskin Bill here that it all came about, sister," said Arthur Ashley, as the guide came upon the piazza.

"We shared his camp with him one night, and he told his story, and so I recognized him, for I believed him dead, as he did that I also had fallen on that fateful night."

"Buckskin Sam, our chief of scouts at the fort, then told of how a Hercules Ranchero had married a girl he had found upon the plains, and Bill and myself determined to see if it was you that had become the bride of the Prairie Hercules."

"So the fort surgeon came with us, and opening the graves we discovered that though my parents, and brothers, with the three colored servants were there, your remains could not be found, and yet these eight bodies in the graves."

"Yes, eight, and so it was that Sol, my husband I mean, Captain Solomon Soulette of the Rangers, decided that they were the bodies of our party, my parents, my brothers and the negroes, with Guide Bill here."

"I am anxious to meet this splendid husband of yours, sis, for I know I shall like him."

"Well, he will be here soon, perhaps within a week, and he will be delighted to welcome you as from the grave, I assure you."

"Well, to-morrow I will have to go to the nearest town, as I have some dispatches to send from the commandant of the fort, and some business to attend to, but I shall return in a few days and remain until your husband returns."

"As you will also do, Buckskin Bill?"

"No, Miss Ellen, I have got to get back to my pelts and traps, for I left 'em uncared for; but I'll stay a couple o' days, and when yer needs me, yer'll know whar to find me, for I'll see to that."

The following day, under the guidance of Black Sampson, Arthur Ashley started for the town, a couple of days' ride away, for the negro was going back to his herds in the hills on the way to where the officer wished to go, and Buckskin Bill returned to his trapping in the mountains, so that the wife of the Hercules once more found herself alone, but far happier than ever before in the joy of her brother's not having been also slain in the fearful massacre which had torn from her all other near kindred.

CHAPTER V.

A SHOT IN THE DARK.

LIEUTENANT ARTHUR ASHLEY could almost feel the look of settled sadness, so long resting upon his face, fading from it as he rode along on the trail which led him from the town back to his sister's prairie home.

He had attended to the dispatches for the colonel, and the business that was to be looked after in the town, and started on the back trail, happy in soon again meeting his dearly loved sister.

Black Sampson had guided him as far as his hidden herds, and from there on the trail was open, and so on his return the lieutenant had found the negro awaiting him.

"I jist run down, sah, from de corral, to head yer off, fer yer said as how yer'd be 'long about dis time," said Sampson.

"Yes, and I am glad you came, Black Sampson, for I have here some tobacco and a few little things for you, while I managed to pick up a pair of revolvers of better make than those you wear, which you must accept from me."

Sampson was rejoiced with his presents, and after cooking dinner for the lieutenant, started him on the home trail, while he said:

"Tell Missy Ellen, sah, I does hope massa soon come back, so I kin bring de cattle back home, sah."

And Arthur Ashley rode on his way, his horse

readily following the trail, for the thoughts of the rider seemed far away.

He had made a few purchases for his sister, and one of a new repeating-rifle for his brother-in-law, the Prairie Hercules, and felt happy in the knowledge that he would sleep that night beneath the roof of a home which he now could regard as almost his own.

Night found him some miles away, but soon the glimmer of a distant light guided him on, and he knew that it was in the window of the home of the Prairie Hercules.

He did not notice as he turned into the trail leading direct to Ranch Eden, that a horseman was in sight, and slowly following him.

In the darkness he saw him not, and he had no dread of danger.

So on he went up to the gate, and on until he dismounted at the hitching-rock, and was soon in the cozy cabin parlor.

Another moment and Ellen, who had heard his step, glided into the room and threw herself into his arms with a loving welcome.

Then, from out in the darkness came a flash, followed by the sharp report of a rifle, and Lieutenant Arthur Ashley fell dead upon the floor, while, severely wounded, the form of his sister sunk upon his body with a low, moaning cry.

Then there came a heavy step upon the piazza, and a man strode across to the open window, through which the fatal bullet had sped, and gazed down upon the prostrate, motionless forms.

"A dead shot for both, and they deserved their fate."

"Now to go my way wheresoever my accursed steps may lead me."

The speaker was the Prairie Hercules, the giant owner of the ranch, his face was livid, and all its beauty gone, marred by the fearful fiend of jealous fury which had taken possession of his heart and brain.

And away he sped out into the darkness, just as Rita, the Mexican servant woman, alarmed by the shot came into the house and beheld the red work of the Prairie Hercules.

She was a woman of nerve and quick to act, so she sprung forward to find her mistress still living, the officer dead.

Instantly she ran and called for help from Carlos, her husband, and away he sped to a ranchero surgeon twelve miles away, while the woman did all that she could for her wounded mistresses.

It was midnight when the surgeon came, and half an hour after he said:

"The wound is dangerous, but not fatal, I think, and I will remain and take care of the poor woman."

"And the senor?" asked the woman.

"Is dead, of course, for the bullet pierced his heart."

"Poor senor," and Rita told the good-hearted surgeon the story of the coming of the handsome officer; but Ellen had kept the secret of his being her brother, knowing that the woman would tell her husband, and he would be sure to head off the Prairie Hercules and make the secret known to him, which she did not desire, intending as she had said to "surprise Sol" herself with the information.

Better indeed had it been, had Carlos, the Mexican, known it and told all, when he had gone to the Rangers with the information that the Comanches no longer threatened that part of the country.

And so it was that a shadow fell upon the fair fame of the beautiful wife of the Prairie Hercules, in that the officer was not known to be her brother then, and when it became known that the Rangers had returned that fatal night, and their captain, Sol Soulette, had departed for his ranch, the rancheros felt that he had fired the death-shot, maddened by jealousy and then fled.

The surgeon, however, sent his report of the mysterious killing of Lieutenant Ashley, to the commandant of the fort, and an investigation was made which literally made no discovery further than the facts, and thus the matter ended, for inquiries, and pursuit of murderers in that wild land were not very thorough.

The body of the lieutenant was laid in a grave on the banks of the little stream, half a mile from the ranch, and at its head mouths after, wandering cowboys and hunters discovered a marble slab on which was carved:

"MY BROTHER,

ARTHUR ASHLEY, LIEUT. —TH U. S.

CAVALRY,

Slain by an Unknown Foe,

Oct. 14th, 18—."

When after long weeks Ellen Soulette arose from her bed of suffering, she was but a wreck of her former self.

If she knew who had fired the fatal shot, no word of hers ever betrayed the knowledge, and when necessary to speak of her husband she referred to him as having mysteriously disappeared, perhaps from having been captured by a roving band of Comanches, or by Mexican raiders, and she would add:

"I do not believe that he is dead, and some day he will return."

Black Sampson seemed to understand all, and was as silent as the grave.

He loved his beautiful mistress, as dearly as he had the Hercules, his master, and he devoted his life to her.

Quiet, sad-faced Ellen Soulette went about her home and duties.

She took the management of the place in her own hands, and spent half of each day on horseback and improved the ranch all in her power.

She seemed anxious to add to her riches, and yet it did not appear as though for her own pleasure.

No, she was looking into the future still with hope, for her brave nature had not broken with all that she had passed through.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HERMITESS OF RANCH EDEN.

SEVERAL years passed away and Ranch Eden had prospered well.

Its herds of cattle and ponies were numbered by the hundreds, and all about the home there was an air of comfort never seen in other places where men struggled hard for fortune.

Carlos the Mexican was the chief cowboy, for he had several men under him, and his wife was as before the faithful servitor of Ellen Soulette at the latter's home.

Black Sampson was the trusted manager under his mistress, while she was the superintendent over all.

Her beauty had returned to her after she regained her health from her long suffering with her wound, and she was noted as the best lady rider upon the prairies.

She could lasso ponies or cattle, could fire a rifle and revolver with deadly aim, and had learned to follow a trail as unerringly as an Indian.

She held no fear of anything, and defied danger in any form that it might come.

But she kept wholly to herself, saw no one who called from other ranches, had but a cold bow for those she had known when the Hercules was at home.

So thoroughly did she ignore all attempts at sociability from admirers, that she soon became known as the "Hermitess of Eden Ranch," and also the "Hermitess in Black," for her dress at home and in the saddle was of deepest black, a sable plume drooping from her black sombrero with its broad brim.

Her saddle Carlos had made for her, with one broad horn, revolver holsters and a crook for the coiled lariat to hang upon.

When mounted upon one of the fleet horses she kept for her own use, she always went fully armed, with repeating rifle, a belt of arrows and a pair of revolvers in her saddle holsters, and then woe be unto the man who crossed her path with evil intent.

One afternoon a courier on his way to the fort stopped at the Eden Ranch with a broken-down horse.

He was promptly supplied with a fresh animal, and as an appreciation of the kindness shown him by the beautiful Hermitess gave her a bundle of late newspapers.

Seated that night in her cozy sitting-room reading over the papers her face suddenly flushed and then turned deadly pale as she read something that had caught her eyes.

Rising she went out upon the rear piazza and gave a shrill whistle, and instantly it was answered by a like call from a cabin not far away.

Apparently satisfied Ellen Soulette returned to her room and soon after a negro entered and respectfully bowed while he said:

"You want me, missy?"

"Yes, Black Sampson, sit down there, for I have something to read to you."

It was the giant negro who had been so faithful to his master, the Prairie Hercules, and afterward to Ellen Soulette.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, top boots, hunting-shirt, and carried a broad-brimmed sombrero in his hand.

About his waist was a belt of arms, and Black Sampson looked the very man to use them when there was need of it.

He was certainly a splendid specimen of a

man, some five inches over six feet, stalwart, limbed, strong as a buffalo and as active as a mustang.

His face was a noble study in ebony, and it was bold, fearless and resolute.

Taking the seat to which Mrs. Soulette had motioned him, he awaited her pleasure, and her manner showed that she was nervous and had something of importance to communicate.

"Sampson, the courier who was here to-day left me some late papers, and here is one from Omaha, Nebraska, with some army news in it."

"I will read you something herein that attracted my attention, and I wish you to tell me just what you think of it."

"Yes, missy."

After an effort, which showed a struggle for self-control, she read as follows:

"THE HERCULES HIGHWAYMAN."

"The Overland coach on the Overland was again held up on Tuesday last by the man who has made his home a terror along the border trails, and who is variously known as the 'Giant Road-Agent,' 'Hercules Highwayman' and 'Soldier Hercules.'"

"He obtained from the passengers a fair sum in money, but did not take their all, nor did he rob a lady that was along, for he appears too gallant a man to steal from the pockets of the fair sex."

"An officer was along from Fort M—and from him our reporter gained some interesting information regarding this strange, bold character and man of real mystery."

"The officer referred to States that the man is six feet five in height, weighs nearly three hundred pounds, and is a perfect type of magnificent physique."

"He was living as a hermit when first heard of at Fort M—and was supposed to be an ally of the Sioux, until one day he met a squadron of soldiers with Buffalo Bill as guide, and they were going straight into an ambush when warned of their danger by the hermit."

"In fact he served them so well that he enabled them to gain a great victory over the Sioux and being severely wounded was carried by Buffalo Bill to the fort, where upon his recovery he was offered the commission of an officer, which he refused."

"He told the colonel that he had a mania for gambling, and as an officer would be led into temptation, and when playing was reckless in the extreme."

"But he joined the army as a private in a cavalry regiment, was promoted to a corporal, and all went well until he took to gambling, lost money, grew desperate and one night killed the paymaster, robbed him and fled."

"Soon after he appeared upon the road as a highwayman, and was cleverly captured by the Texas Pony Express Rider Butterfly Billy, whom our readers have often seen in Omaha."

"Taken to Fort M—the Hercules was tried, found guilty of many crimes and sentenced to be hanged; but a few days before the one appointed for his execution he escaped, the officer states by killing his guard he thinks, and after some years' absence again appeared upon the trails as a road-agent."

"It has been thought that he was the chief of the road-agents known as the Mounted Miners, but he has never been seen in company with others, so must be his own master, following his evil and desperate career solely alone."

"Certain it is that this bold man is a terror on the Overland, and he robs when and where he pleases."

"His range is over a hundred miles, and he is seldom seen at the same place twice, so that pursuit of him, and traps set for him are useless."

"After his escape from the fort, Butterfly Billy also left the Overland as Pony Express Rider, and this gave rise at the fort to the belief that the handsome youth was really a detective on the track of the Hercules, to arrest him for some crime he had committed elsewhere, while others asserted that the daring young rider had some personal revenge to satiate in having run the famous road-agent down."

"Now, so the officer who is one in pursuit states, the Pony Rider is again on the trail, better mounted than ever before, and his rides are on the same beat where the Hercules Highwayman has been seen."

"This would give rise to the belief that Butterfly Billy is really an Overland detective, or has indeed a private debt to square with the dreaded lone outlaw."

"A peculiarity of this Hercules is that he is always mounted upon a magnificent black horse of large size, and dresses in the full uniform of a general of cavalry, top-boots, epaulettes, plumed hat, sash and all, and this causes the soldiers to speak of him as the Giant General, a name he seems to prefer to any other, from what the Overland stage-drivers say of their meetings with him."

"Whatever the motive of Butterfly Billy for again riding the Overland Trails, we hope that success may come his way again, and give this daring Hercules once more into his power."

"From our same informant we learn that the name that the Hercules enlisted in the army under was that of 'Sol Soule,' so if any of our readers know aught of such a person, we will be glad to hear from them."

Such was the article which the Hermitess read aloud to Black Sampson, and upon her finishing

it, she laid down the paper, and waited for a comment from the negro, who had listened with the deepest attention throughout.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE TRAIL.

BLACK SAMPSON seemed to feel that his mistress awaited for him to speak, but he uttered no word.

In silent meditation he sat, as though conning over carefully all that he had heard, and seeing that he did not intend to speak Ellen Soulette said:

"Well, Sampson, what do you think of it?"

"The readin', missy?"

"Of course."

"It's mighty strange readin', missy."

"Have you nothing to say?"

"What you want me to say, missy?"

"Sampson, you do not wish to hurt me, that is just it, but I believe you think as I do in this matter."

Sampson made no reply.

"As you do not speak of your own accord, I will ask you some questions?"

"Yes, missy."

"I never have referred to your master, my husband, for a long time now, but I wish to ask you of him to-night."

"Yes, missy."

"Did you ever see a man of finer form?"

"No, missy."

"What was his height?"

"Six feet five inches."

"And his weight?"

"About two hundred and eighty, missy."

"He was about your size, I believe?"

"Jist about, missy."

"He always rode a black horse?"

"He did for a fact."

"And often said that he would like to have been a general in the army, for he would show off so well in a handsome uniform?"

"I has often heard him say so, missy."

"Was your master fond of gambling?"

"Lordy, Missy Ellen, dat was de ruination ob him in his old home in Kentucky."

"He gambled away his inheritance, and then he kilt a man in a duel over cards, and his best friend at that and went away with only me."

"Massa Sol were a madman, Missy Ellen, when he got cards in his brain and heart, and he comed here ter Texas, 'way out on dis ranch ter give 'em up."

"Den, missy, he find you and I hope he never hab no more sorrow no more; but oh, Lordy, how hard, how hard it am."

Poor Sampson was talking now in deep earnestness, and his voice was choked with tears that swelled up from his noble heart.

"Sampson, you heard all that I read you about this highwayman?"

"Every word, missy."

"You heard of his living a hermit life, of his refusing to become a commissioned officer on account of his mania for gambling, and that when he did gamble he became like a madman?"

"I heard it, missy."

"You heard of his size, his black horse, his going alone as a road-agent, his showing a generous nature in spite of his robberies, not to take all, and not to rob a woman?"

"I heard it all."

"Then, too, you heard the name he enlisted under?"

"Sol somethin', missy."

"Yes, Sol Soule."

"Dat's it."

"Now, Sol is the abbreviation of Solomon."

"Dat am a fact."

"And Soule is an abbreviation of Soulette, for the double t and e are left off, you see."

"Dat's so, missy."

"Now, Sampson, what do you think of all this?"

Sampson shook his head solemnly.

He would not commit himself.

So Ellen Soulette asked:

"Shall I tell you what I think, Sampson?"

"Yes, missy."

"I believe that this Hercules Highwayman of the Overland is none other than my husband," said the beautiful hermit of Ranch Eden, earnestly.

"Oh! Lordy, missy!"

"I feel it, I know it; and as well as I, Sampson, you know that your master left here because he fired that fatal shot which killed my poor brother Arthur and nearly took my life."

"Rita said that she heard the sound of hoofs down the trail when she came to me, and I'll tell you, Sampson, that the bullet which passed through the heart of my brother and lodged in

my body was given me by the surgeon, and it fits in the shells of my husband's rifle!"

"He didn't know 'twas your brother, massa didn't, missy."

"No; he saw me welcome poor Arthur, and believing I had not a kinsman upon earth, fired that shot in his mad jealousy, just as in his gambling, he would become temporarily crazed."

"Poor massa, missy."

"Sampson!"

The negro fairly jumped at the manner in which the woman spoke his name.

"I am determined upon one thing."

"Yes, missy."

"I shall send Carlos to-morrow in search of the guide, Buckskin Bill."

"You wish to see him, missy?"

"Yes, I wish him to come here and take charge of the ranch."

"It is in fine condition and is a valuable piece of property, with its belongings, as you know, for it has trebled in value under my management with your great aid."

"Thank you, Missy Ellen."

"Now, Buckskin Bill told me if I needed him to call upon him, and I do need him now."

"Can't I do it, missy?"

"No, for I need you for a more important work, Sampson, and Buckskin Bill to take charge of the ranch."

"I see, missy."

"When he comes I shall place all in his hands, and he is to manage everything until my return."

"You going away, missy?"

"Yes, and you are going with me."

"I am ready, missy."

"I know that, my good Sampson, and I wish you to begin preparations."

"You will need two horses, and I will need two, and the four must be the best animals we have on the ranch."

"That's so, missy."

"You have your repeating-rifle, I have mine and all other weapons needed, and our led horses can carry packs, for we are going a long way and must be prepared to camp in bad weather and good."

"You look after the horses and weapons, and I will see to the stores and outfit of blankets and other things, and I will ride my brother's saddle."

"Why, missy, it won't—"

"I shall go in male attire, Sampson, as a young man, do you understand, for no woman would dare venture as such on the trail that you and I are to follow."

"Do not speak of this, but you must be ready to go with me, so now send Carlos to me, for I shall have him start at dawn to find the trapper, Buckskin Bill, and the day after he arrives, you, Black Sampson, and I take the trail to the Overland stage roads to find the Hercules Highwayman."

"Do you understand, Sampson?"

"Oh, yas, missy, but let me go, for I kin find massa."

"No, I shall go with you, and we shall find him, mark my words," and the look of stern resolve upon the face of the woman showed that she had the iron will to carry out the plan she had determined upon.

And ten days after the two were on the trail northward.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OVERLAND DETECTIVE.

THE commanding general of the Platte Department was on a round of inspection, and was being entertained right royally by Colonel Russell Carter, his friend and one of his favorite officers at Fort M—, a far advanced post which had rendered much valuable service.

Colonel Carter had pleasant quarters, which being a widower, were occupied only by himself and his daughter Mattie, a lovely young miss just verging upon womanhood, and who was a belle among the beaux, a favorite with every one in the command and a heroine, for she was a reckless little thing that was constantly running her small feet into all kinds of dangerous paths.

Fort M— was a most charming post, in spite of its peculiar position, and the ladies dwelling there formed a social and happy military family.

There was one of the young ladies who was an heiress, and a beauty, and this was the daughter of Captain Allen, the commander of the cavalry battalion from the —th regiment.

In spite of all the good offers which she had received, Ivy Allen remained either "heart whole and fancy free," or was in love with some one away from the fort, which she kept as her

own affair, unless her sweet little friend and constant companion, Mattie Carter, was in her secret, for these two, though several years were between their respective ages, were inseparable.

The general had been delighted with his inspection of Fort M., for he found all in perfect condition, the soldiers under thorough discipline, and the few things to be investigated had been given a satisfactory explanation.

One of these matters was the fact that the outlaws on the Overland had been giving much trouble of late to travelers, notwithstanding the strenuous attempts of the military to capture them.

The band known as "Mounted Miners of the Overland" were a dangerous lot, under a skilled captain, who was called "Yankee Kit," and it was said that they had a spy in the towns who reported to them when coaches carried booty, and were to be held up.

But worse than this band was the terror inspired by a lone horseman who had won the name of the Giant General.

The history of this man Colonel Carter had made known to the general, as also the fact that he had just had word from the superintendent of the Overland Company at Omaha, that he had hopes that the daring detective, Butterfly Billy, would soon run down this scourge of the trails.

"And who is this Butterfly Billy, Carter?" asked the general.

"I will tell you, sir, what I know of him, but it must be in confidence."

"Certainly."

"Nearly two years ago we were out from the fort for a deer hunt, officers and their families, when Miss Ivy Allen became separated from the party, and saw suddenly dash into sight a Pony Rider:

"At that moment he was fired upon by some Sioux in ambush, who then dashed out upon him, as his horse fell dead; but the brave girl rode like the wind toward him, as he stood at bay, and springing up behind her, he thus escaped."

"Brave, noble girl."

"She is, indeed, sir, all that you can say good of her."

"Well, it was Butterfly Billy whom she rescued, and one day at the fort he saved my daughter, Mattie, from being trampled to death by a herd of steers that had escaped from the corral."

"He did this in view of us all, and at the risk of his own life."

"So much for the boy's pluck, for he is now under twenty; and let me tell you that he was secretly a detective, though a Pony Rider."

"He it was who captured alone this Hercules of the Overland, and it is his history, as given me from his own lips, that I now tell you."

"The boy is a Texan, and his widowed mother sought a home upon the frontier and established a ranch."

"There the boy was raised, and he is a marvel as a shot and rider, and for pluck."

"But a Mexican band of outlaws raided the country and his mother was kidnapped, along with an old ranchero, who had once been a lover of the lady, I believe."

"The boy took their trail, and after three years tracked them to the Overland, in this country, and went as a Pony Rider to find them."

"He discovered, by capturing the Giant General, that he knew of his mother, and that her kidnapper, the outlaw chief, had taken her life."

"But to get this information the Hercules demanded that the youth should aid his escape."

"This he frankly confessed that he did."

"Ah!"

"Under the circumstances, general, I did not blame him, and remember this was given to me in confidence."

"I understand, colonel, and it shall remain a secret, but your Butterfly Billy is a bold one."

"I told you what he was, sir."

"Well, he aided the Hercules to escape, and then left the country as Pony Rider."

"Going to visit his mother's grave in the mountains, he found dwelling there her old lover, Major Mabrey, the Texas ranchero, and one time an army officer."

"He lived the life of a hermit in a small cabin he had built; but he left with Butterfly Billy and together they went back to Texas."

"And there one day the youth captured, disguised as a peddler, Yankee Kit, the chief of the Mounted Miners, whom his deeds had driven from the trails here."

"When faced by Major Mabrey and Butterfly Billy, Yankee Kit confessed all he knew about the abduction of Mrs. Royal by the Mexican

guerrilla chief, whom he was then with, and told the youth that the grave near Castle Rock did not hold the body of his mother, but of a Mexican girl whom the chief had cast off, and who took her own life."

"This is remarkable."

"Indeed it is, sir, and he further told him that Mrs. Royal was still the captive of the outlaw chief, for some purpose, and that both were to be found in the northern country, for the secret leader of the Mounted Miners was none other than the Mexican guerrilla captain."

"A strange story indeed, Carter."

"Yes, sir; and furthermore, this Yankee Kit told Butterfly Billy that the Giant General, who, after his escape, had left this country, had drifted around for a year, visited him, Kit, in Mexico, and penniless, had returned to the old trails as a highwayman, and that he knew just where the chief and the captive woman could be found."

"Butterfly Billy at once put Yankee Kit in irons, and made him a prisoner in Major Mabrey's ranch home, while he again came north and took the trail to hunt down the Mexican outlaw chief through the capture of the Hercules Highwayman."

"The superintendent of the Overland knows Butterfly Billy's story as I do, and the boy is now on the Overland nominally as a Pony Rider, but really as a detective."

"Where did he get his strange name?"

"From his Pony Rider's dress, a scarlet cap, blue jacket trimmed with gold, white corduroy pants, top-boots, red sash and generally gorgeous make-up."

"His real name is Rayford Royal, but he registered in the company's books as Ray Ford, and is only known as Butterfly Billy."

"He is also called Buffalo Bill's Protege, and the two are inseparable friends, and are now off on the war-path after both the Hercules Highwayman and the Mounted Miners."

"One of the youth's hobbies is to ride black horses only, and he has the finest lot of animals I ever saw, all of them jet black."

"His outfit is superb, and he has given his horses, which he has trained perfectly, such names as Jet, Ebony, Darkness, Midnight, Blackskin, and Gloom."

"He is certainly a character."

"He certainly is, general, and I venture to say that he will capture the Hercules and drive off from the trail the Mounted Miners."

"I sincerely hope so, and in his work he has strong backing in Buffalo Bill, a most remarkable man, from all accounts, for I never met him."

"He is a phenomenon, sir, and the two Bills are a team together that I have high hopes of—What is it, orderly?"

"The officer of the day, sir, sent me to report the coming of Buffalo Bill toward the fort, carrying in his arms Butterfly Billy, who appears to be desperately wounded, sir," was the response of the orderly, and the news at once sent a thrill of excitement through the fort.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MEETING.

Two men were seated upon a log at the peak of a rugged ridge of hills, and a strange pair they were.

One was a man of gigantic size, dressed in the uniform of a cavalry general, his face bearded and his hair worn long, falling to his waist.

It was a strange face, full of power, resolution and recklessness, and yet bitter withal almost to cruelty.

Not far away was a small log cabin, and a huge black horse was staked out near, while a military saddle and bridle hung from a tree ready for use.

The man was armed with a belt of revolvers and a sword, and a rifle stood leaning against the cabin.

It was the Hercules Highwayman, and he was supposed to be at his home, or secret retreat.

Up to the peak, which was overshadowed by a still higher one, divided by a chasm where the mountain had split in two, led a steep and rough pathway, or trail, and up this had come the visitor who now sat on the log by the side of the Hercules.

The visitor appeared to be a young Indian chief, in war-paint and feathers, and what the conversation between them was, it suddenly ended in the red-skinned visitor springing to his feet and leveling a revolver at the Hercules.

But the Hercules was quick as lightning too, and though taken by surprise drew a revolver and the report of the two weapons rung out together.

And both men fell to the ground, one seemingly shot through the heart, the other severely wounded.

Then up the steep path at a run came a tall form clad in buckskin.

He carried a repeating rifle in one hand and his eyes were fixed ahead.

Tall, perfectly molded as to form, with a face as handsome as an Apollo he was ready to face death in any shape that it might come.

The one thus coming upon the scene was Buffalo Bill, a man too well known to need a description here, and the one he had come to the aid of, though in the disguise of a red-skin, was his protege, Butterfly Billy, the Black Horse Rider of the Overland.

At a glance Buffalo Bill took in the situation, and hastily he examined the wound of his young friend.

"It is bad, Billy, so I must get you to the fort; you ended the career of the Hercules and I will bury him, for he is a man after all," and the scout hastily bound up the wound in the youth's side and then dug a shallow grave in a crevice and placed in it the huge form of the Hercules.

Filling in the grave he raised the wounded youth in his arms and bore him to the horse of the Hercules, upon which he placed him, and leading him to their camp some distance off, was soon on the way to the fort.

The sufferings of Butterfly Billy were intense, but at length, after a long time upon the trail, the fort was reached and the young Overland Detective was taken into the hospital quarters of Surgeon Delamater, where he could receive every attention.

The surgeon reported the wound a most dangerous one, and wondered that it had not proven fatal on the way to the fort.

But Buffalo Bill had proven himself quite a skillful surgeon, and had borne the wounded boy in his arms when he was unable longer to ride upon his horse, and thus the long, tedious and painful journey had been made.

Having seen the youth in safe hands, Buffalo Bill reported at headquarters, and was ushered into the presence of Colonel Carter, who sat there with the general, and they were discussing his return and the wounding of the Black Horse Rider when he entered.

"You look haggard to death, Cody; here, let me give you a glass of brandy, and it will brace you up."

"General Hancock, I take pleasure in presenting our chief of scouts, William F. Cody, known to fame, history and romance as Buffalo Bill."

General Hancock warmly welcomed the famous scout, and revived by the brandy, Buffalo Bill said:

"I suppose, general, you wish to hear what has happened?"

"Certainly, Cody, out with it, for I told the general not half an hour ago that you had gone with your young pard, the Black Horse Rider, to hunt down the Hercules Highwayman."

"But I told Surgeon Delamater to report to me the exact condition of Butterfly Billy."

"The surgeon says, sir, that Billy has a very dangerous wound, but that he hopes he will pull through."

"I am glad of that, and if good nursing and skill will save him, he will live."

"Now, what have you done?"

"Well, sir, we hung about the trails until I got a glimpse of the Hercules one day and dogged him to his lair, which is on the peak of a ridge with only a rugged, steep trail to get there."

"He turned off to it at the crossing of a stream, so that his trail, across a water-shed of rocks, was not noticeable."

"Billy, in his disguise as a Sioux, then went there while I hung back some distance away."

"He found the Hercules watching him, and went on to his cabin, where they took a rest upon a log; but what passed, Billy is a little incoherent about, only I expect he drew upon him, and they both got in their shots together, or not two seconds apart."

"Butterfly Billy fired first, and the Hercules got it through the heart."

"Bravo for the boy!" cried Colonel Carter, while General Hancock remarked:

"I am growing more in love with your young hero, Carter."

"I ran up the ridge, for Billy would go alone, and found the Hercules dead and the youth, as I at first feared, dying; but he rallied, and as soon as I dressed his wound I buried the outlaw and then came on to the fort as fast as I dared travel."

"And you deserve great credit, my gallant friend, for your task has been a severe one," said General Hancock.

"And the Hercules is dead, Cody, you are sure?"

"Yes, colonel."

"You buried him?"

"Yes, sir, in his uniform, and with a blanket wrapped about him; but his weapons, in my anxiety about Billy, I overlooked, though I took a hasty survey of his cabin."

"Did you find anything of importance?"

"Nothing, sir; but after a few days' rest I shall return and get his arms, and also make a thorough search of his cabin and surroundings, for you know it is said that he has laid by a large amount of gold and plunder."

"Yes, and you may discover if he is really in league with these Mounted Miners."

"I will do all I can to find out, sir," was the reply, and the scout retired to his own quarters for much needed rest.

But several days after, discovering that Butterfly Billy was slowly improving, he set out alone for the home of the Hercules.

CHAPTER X.

THE HAUNTED CABIN.

THE trail taken by Buffalo Bill, after leaving the fort, led him back to the retreat of the Hercules Highwayman.

He held on from the ford, over the water-washed rocks, leaving no trail as the Hercules had done, and thus had thrown all pursuers off his trail.

He knew that the Hercules had the name of being the secret chief of the Mounted Miners, and though Butterfly Billy and himself had found the man apparently dwelling alone, that there might be others near and that he would have to be very cautious not to run into an ambush.

So he left his horse hidden in a thicket at the base of the ridge, and continued on, on foot, up the steep trail to the peak, where was the retreat of the Hercules.

He would have found another trail if he could have done so, for he did not like to follow the old one; but this he could not discover on account of the precipitous sides of the ridge, so he held on up the path which Butterfly Billy and himself had taken upon their former visit to the retreat.

Not a soul did he see, and arriving at the cabin he found all as he had left it.

The rifle leaned against the logs, and near it was the sword of the Hercules, while the door, which he had not closed, swung to and fro on its leather hinges.

Within all was the same, and the grave was before him, with the logs which he had placed there to keep off the coyotes.

"No one has been here, that is certain, so after all the retreat of the Hercules must have been kept a secret by him from all others."

"Now to see if I can make any discoveries as to where he has hidden his plunder."

The belt of arms which he had taken from the waist of the giant before burying him, hung on the tree limb where he had placed them, and these with the rifle and sword he examined critically.

"They are splendid weapons, that is certain," said the scout, as he looked them over.

Then he began to look through the cabin.

The furniture consisted of a bunk-bed, a table, chair of rustic but comfortable make from cedar limbs, and some cooking utensils on the hearth.

There was a cupboard containing some tinware, several blankets, a bearskin, buffalo-robe and some ammunition.

But this was all, for nowhere could he find any gold or plunder.

Buffalo Bill then looked around the ridge, but he discovered that the only means of ascent and descent was by way of the trail he had come.

"He must have another retreat, where his plunder is buried, though this certainly looks like his living camp."

"Well, it is late, and I will camp here to-night, for it looks like rain, and I cannot find better quarters."

So the scout went after his horse and brought him up to the shed behind the cabin, and into which a door opened, so that the Hercules could retreat that way.

There was plenty of prairie hay there, showing that the outlaw had prepared for his horse when the business of robbery on the Overland was not good.

Wood was also piled up in one end of the cabin, and an ax was over the door, so a fire was soon blazing upon the hearth, and the aroma of boiling coffee made the place within seem quite

cheery in comparison with the gloom without, for the rain had now begun to fall heavily.

After a comfortable supper from his provision pouch, and a smoke of his pipe, Buffalo Bill looked in at his horse, and seeing that he was all right, arranged his couch, and sunk to sleep.

How long he slept he never knew, but he was awakened by the howling of the winds, and mingling with them came a sound startlingly like a human groan.

Buffalo Bill was not over superstitious.

He had laughed at his comrades for their dread of ghosts, for 'most all bordermen are filled with superstition, as much so, in fact, are the men who dwell in the mountain fastnesses, and trail the pathless prairies, as are the sailors who believe in the stories of the sea being haunted.

But Buffalo Bill was certainly startled at this weird groan, coming from he knew not where.

He arose, approached the door, and opening it, looked out.

The fire had burned low, the rain fell heavily, and was driven with force against the cabin by the wind, which was howling about the mountains most savagely.

But from the grave of the dead Hercules came the sound, and certainly it was a groan from human lips.

The scout was awed, and for a moment stood in silent meditation.

Then he stepped back, threw more wood upon the fire, and placing a buffalo-robe over his shoulders, stepped out into the darkness, his rifle in hand.

He went straight toward the grave, and as he did so the groans were still heard, but seemed to retreat as he advanced.

The grave was as he had left it, and yet the moaning sound continued, like unto a human being in anguish.

Around the cabin went the scout, and upon looking at his horse, he found that he was loose.

He certainly had not forgotten to tie him, and yet the lariat end rested upon the ground.

Making the animal fast again, he entered the cabin, and throwing more wood upon the fire, lighted his pipe and sat down to smoke and think.

Distinctly, still, the groans were heard, and the scout was more bothered than he cared to admit.

At last he determined to go to sleep again, and after several efforts did so.

But he was awakened with a suddenness that caused him to spring to his feet in real alarm.

And to his ears, amid the still falling rain and howling winds, came appalling shrieks in the deep, powerful voice of a man.

Buffalo Bill had never up to that moment known the meaning of the word fear; but this was beyond his comprehension, and he muttered:

"The accursed place is haunted!"

The shrieks came from the vicinity of the grave of the Hercules, and once more the scout went forth to see what he could discover.

But the cries died away among the cliffs, with many a wild echo cast back to the ears of Buffalo Bill, who returned to the cabin and sat down before the fire, which he kept burning brightly.

His horse he again found to be unfastened, and the animal seemed strangely uneasy, and the scout determined to sleep no more.

So, smoking his pipe and thinking, he remained before the fire until the dawn came.

The rain ceased with the break of day, and after breakfast the scout went the rounds of the ridge, deeply impressed with the happenings of the night.

"I wouldn't stay another night in this place for a cool thousand dollars," he muttered, as he led his horse away, and left the cabin behind him.

"If this place is not haunted, I dreamt all I heard last night, and I was awake as surely as I am at this moment."

"Wonder what Colonel Carter will think of this story, I have to tell him?"

"Laugh at me, I guess; but all the same it was no delusion on my part, those groans and shrieks, yes, and the untying of my horse."

"I am half-inclined to think that ghost-stories are true."

So saying Buffalo Bill mounted his horse and rode on toward the Overland Trail.

He held on his way to the nearest relay station, where he knew the man in charge, and riding up to the cabin was greeted with a loud hail and the words:

"Ho, Buffalo Bill, did yer know that ther ghost of ther Hercules Highwayman were on ther Overland Trail?"

CHAPTER XI.

THE SPECTER HIGHWAYMAN.

IN spite of his nerve, the salutation of Jake Reeves, the relay station-agent, somewhat startled Buffalo Bill; but he replied calmly as he dismounted:

"What story is this you are telling, Jake?"

"It's no story, Bill, but ther solid truth, fer I hain't ther only one has seen it."

"Seen what?"

"Ther ghost o' ther Hercules Highwayman."

"Nonsense!"

"It hain't nonsense, but sense, fer I wasn't born in ther woods ter be skeert by a owl, as yer should know."

"I know that you are a fearless fellow, Jake, and have a record for nerve above the average."

"Well, I tell yer that I seen the specter, too."

"Some one else has seen it, too, then?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Ther gamest driver on ther Overland, as yer will say when I tell you it was Bob Burt."

"Good authority, Jake; but what did he see?"

"He saw the Hercules on horseback, at the very place where the Giant General once held up his coach."

"There he was, seated upon his horse by the roadside, white as death, motionless, and gazing at him in the moonlight."

"The passengers saw him, too, and Bob Burt drew up, expecting to be halted, but the man, specter, or whatever it was did not speak, and so the coach rolled on."

"When was this?"

"Night before last."

"And you have seen the same thing?"

"I have."

"When?"

"The same night."

"Where?"

"Right here, Pard Bill."

"At your station?"

"Yes."

"How was it?"

"You see, word came along by Pony Express Rider that the Hercules Highwayman had been killed, that Butterfly Billy had just laid him low."

"He did; for I buried the Hercules, Jake."

"Then you knows he hain't above ground?"

"I do."

"Waal, I had no idee of seein' any one on ther trail that time, for no coach was due, and ther Pony Rider had passed, and so I was enjoying a pipe after supper, and the comfort of knowing that Butterfly Billy had called in the Hercules's chips, don't you know?"

"Suddenly I waked up, and Bill, do you mind me, I hain't no believer in ghosts, or leastwise I wasn't, and afore I came West I were a undertaker, so had full acquaintance with dead folks; but, Lord love me, there was the Giant General!"

"Where?"

"Right there in the Overland Trail, passing along as quiet as if his horse wore moccasins, for I heard no scound of hoofs."

"He was sitting bolt upright, his sombrero drooping over his face, yet, I could see that it was awful white, and he turned his head and looked squarely at me."

"I tell you, Bill, I could not move from my seat, and he just passed on afore I knew what to do."

"Then what did you do?"

"I just run into the cabin, got my rifle and sent a shot flying after him; but I stopped suddenly with my shootin', for such a shriek from human's lips I never heerd; it was awful."

"You hit him then?"

"I don't know what I did; but I got tired of the moonlight, and somehow I didn't rest well all night."

"I don't wonder," said Buffalo Bill, remembering his own experience the night before.

"The next day I looked for tracks but saw none, and I didn't find no dead body, so I don't shoot at ghosts no more."

Buffalo Bill gave a light laugh, but it was a forced one, and then Jake Reeves continued:

"The next day, yesterday morning, Bob Burt came by with his coach, and told me he had seen the Hercules the night before."

"What do you think now, Bill?"

Before Buffalo Bill could reply there was heard the rapid clatter of hoofs, and Jake Reeves called out:

"It's Pony Rider Cricket, for this is about his time."

Then there dashed into sight a horse and rider, and the animal seemed to be fairly flying.

"I'm ahead ten minutes, Jake, for I pressed hard to have a talk with you.

"Hallo, Mr. Cody, glad to see you!" and the Pony Express Rider who was known as Cricket, from his slim limbs and chirping voice, sprung from his horse, while Jake brought him a fresh animal and transferred the saddle.

"What is it, Cricket?" asked Jake as he finished strapping the saddle.

"I thought word went along that the Hercules Highwayman had turned up his toes?"

"So he has."

"Killed by that flying terror, Butterfly Billy, the Black Horse Rider, it was said?"

"Yes."

"Well, he isn't dead."

"But Buffalo Bill here planted him."

"Did you, Mr. Cody?"

"I did."

"And you are sure it was the Hercules?"

"Perfectly, for one cannot make a mistake in a man like that."

"Then it was just as I said, for I saw his ghost!"

"His ghost?"

"Sure, if Butterfly Billy killed him and you planted him."

"What did you see?"

"The Hercules, for he robbed me once of a cool thousand, and I know him."

"When?"

"On the trail on my up run, and I saw him seated on his horse on the side of the road."

"Did he speak to you?"

"Not a word."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No, you bet I didn't, for I went by flying in the moonlight; but I must be off, and I only hope I won't run upon him again, for it gave me the cold shivers to see him, you may be sure, when I had been told that he had passed in his chips.

"But, good-by; time's up," and, leaping into his saddle, Pony Rider Cricket dashed off like a bullet, on his run.

"Waal, Bill, what does yer think o' that?"

"It is strange, Jake, to say the least of it."

"You bet it's strange when dead folks goes a prowlin' around the 'arth."

"In all my grave-diggin' experience, and I has plantel many a one, I never seen nothin' ter match this, and I did see it with my own eyes and I doesn't mean glasses neither."

Buffalo Bill was both bothered and thoughtful. He tried to ignore the stories he had heard, of Bob Burt, Jake Reeves and Cricket having seen the Specter Hercules; But then his own experience, of sound, if not sight, seemed to carry out the belief that they were telling the truth.

Then, too, had not his horse been twice unhitched in the shed?

So he determined to make a tour along the Overland and see if he could catch a sight of the specter of the Hercules.

Having had dinner with Jake Reeves he started, and nightfall found him on the trail which in life the Hercules had often traveled.

The moon rose in a cloudless sky over a cliff, and suddenly the scout drew rein.

And no wonder, for it shone full upon the form of a horse and rider going slowly across the trail ahead of him.

"Halt!" and as the word left the lips of the scout he drew a revolver and spurred his horse forward on the run.

When brought in sight of a foe he was ready to meet him, and there he saw black horse and rider, the moonlight glimmering upon his epaulettes, buttons and sword.

But no answer came to his stern command, and when he reached the spot the Specter Highwayman was nowhere to be seen, for he had seemed to noiselessly glide into a pine thicket, the gloom of which was too great to penetrate.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

THE rumor that the Overland Trail was haunted, by the specter of the Hercules Highwayman, spread rapidly, and other testimony than that of Bob Burt, the driver, and Cricket, the Pony Express Rider came in as proof that the ghost was really a thing to dread.

Other drivers, and other pony riders added their testimony to the stories of Bob Burt and Cricket, and soon old hunters and scouts began to dread going along the trails which the Hercules had been wont to travel.

The officers at Fort M— laughed at the story, and having the authority of Buffalo Bill that he had buried the body of the Hercules, after Butterfly Billy had killed him, they did not believe in the specter story.

Still it made its impression, and Surgeon Delamater gave notice that if any one told Butterfly Billy of it, he would ask Colonel Carter to severely punish the one who did so.

Buffalo Bill returned, after nearly a week's absence, to find Colonel Carter had accompanied General Hancock on to several other posts, and that he would be gone from ten days to two weeks.

So what report he had to make, he determined to keep for the colonel himself, and not tell the officer left in command.

The scout found Butterfly Billy greatly improved.

His fever was steadily decreasing, and the bullet had been located and extracted.

The youth was in a fair way to recovery, and Surgeon Delamater told Buffalo Bill that in a couple of weeks more his *protege* would be out of all danger, he hoped.

Thus the days passed on, with rumors still coming in from scout, hunter, Pony Rider and courier of the Specter Highwayman having been again and again seen, until it seemed that the ghost of the Hercules had nothing else to do but to ride up and down the trail and frighten travelers, for he never committed any robberies.

There were several soldiers, returning from escorting an officer to the Overland Trail to take a coach East, who even said that they had seen the Specter Hercules in the daytime, and they were ready to swear to it, too.

When asked why they had not given chase, they were indignant at the suspicion that they would dare pursue a ghost.

And all this time Buffalo Bill kept his own secret, and seemed strangely moody and quiet, his comrades thought.

About this time there was an arrival at the fort, and he became the guest of Captain Allen, for he was a distinguished citizen of Mexico.

Then the secret came out that when her father was stationed at a fort on the Rio Grande, Ivy Allen had been rescued from a band of outlaws who had captured her near the fort, by an ex-Lanero officer, the Senor Captain Don Emilio Soto.

The Don was a man of wealth, had an elegant hacienda home in Mexico, and since his meeting with Ivy Allen had desperately loved her.

Soon after their meeting, Captain Allen's brother, a resident of Texas, got into some trouble in Mexico, and there was a chance that he would be put to death, but he was released through the influence of Don Soto, who thus placed the Allens under another deep obligation to him.

So it was that when Ivy left the fort, the Don received permission to some day follow her with the hope of making her his wife.

She had guarded her secret well, but now when the Don arrived, and came as her acknowledged suitor, there was nothing for Ivy to do but to accept the situation.

And the coming of Don Emilio Soto cast a deep gloom over a score of hearts, for many a young officer had held hopes of one day successfully pleading his case with the beautiful Ivy, and that hope was now dashed to the ground.

Soon after the arrival of Don Emilio Soto, Colonel Carter returned, for his trip had extended into three weeks.

He had much to look after, dispatches to read and duties perform, which had accumulated during his absence; but he was compelled to listen to the wondrous stories of the Specter Highwayman.

"It is all bosh," he said, impatiently, when his adjutant had told him of the various rumors and that a superstitious dread had settled upon the garrison, some of the officers even admitting that they were mystified even to the verge of superstition themselves.

"Send Cody to me, orderly," the colonel said, after his ears had been filled with reports of the Specter Hercules.

In a short while Buffalo Bill appeared, and after welcoming the colonel back, saluted the other officers present, for Captains Allen and Rosafy, and the adjutant of the post were there.

There was also present an old hunter who had returned from north of the Overland, and reported that upon his way back he had camped at the Blue Spring, when suddenly right by his camp, with noiseless hoof-fall, went the Specter Hercules.

He had been too alarmed to fire or to utter a word; but he said in conclusion:

"Now, colonel, you know I don't mistake no jack-rabbit fer a deer, and hain't skeert o' a

grizzly; but I seen what I tells yer, and I only wish I hadn't, fer it comes on me like a warnin' o' death."

"All right, Leatherfoot, we must track this ghost to cover," said the colonel, and the old hunter left the office, and the commandant turned to Buffalo Bill and asked:

"Now, Cody, what do you think of all this nonsense about the specter of the Hercules haunting the Overland Trails?"

"It is no nonsense, Colonel Carter," was the startling response, for such a reply from the lips of Buffalo Bill was startling to those who knew him.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUFFALO BILL HAS SOMETHING TO SAY.

"YOU surprise me, Cody, for of all men, I supposed you would be the last to take up with this nonsense," said Colonel Carter, when he heard Buffalo Bill's response to his question about the Specter Hercules.

"The truth is, Colonel Carter, I am mystified, and I will ask you to explain it if you can, all that I have seen and heard."

"You then have seen the ghost?" said the colonel with a smile.

"I'll tell you, sir, just what I have seen."

"You remember that I left here to go back to the retreat of the Hercules and secure his arms, which in the hurry of getting Butterfly Billy to the fort I neglected to secure, and also thoroughly search the cabin of the outlaw?"

"I remember, Cody, and so I sent for you, hoping you could put aside this foolish talk about a ghost."

"I am sorry that I cannot, sir, and I only regret that I am unable to do so," and the scout spoke with a solemnity which could not but impress his hearers.

"Well, Cody, give us your experience, and perhaps our united minds can solve the mystery of the specter."

"I hope so, Colonel Carter, for I am on the trail of that ghost and wish to run it down."

"But to my story, sir."

"I went to the ridge, left my horse in hiding and tried to find another trail to the summit than that which Butterfly Billy and myself had taken."

"But I found the sides of the ridge too steep, so had to risk an ambush and crept cautiously to the top."

"I found all as I had left it, the door of the cabin open, the rifle and revolver of the Hercules leaning against the logs, and nothing to indicate that any one had been there since our departure."

"And the grave?"

"Was just as I had filled it in, sir."

"Finding nothing by a search, and night coming on with a threatening storm, I determined to take advantage of the cabin for shelter, so went after my horse and housed him in the shed, where I found some hay, and in the cabin I discovered cooking utensils and wood, so I made myself comfortable."

"I had a good supper, smoked for awhile, and the pouring rain making me sleepy with its patter upon the roof, I lay down, congratulating myself upon having found such fine quarters for myself and horse."

"How long I slept I do not know, but I was awakened by the sound of deep groans, and I sprung to my feet, threw wood on the fire, and listened."

"The groans came from outside, so I threw a buffalo-robe I had found in the cabin, about me, and went out."

"The wind howled terribly, and the rain came down in torrents; but the groans came from the grave some fifty feet away."

"Cody!"

"It is true, Colonel Carter; but I could find no clew, so I looked about the ridge, returned to my cabin and went to my couch again."

"It was the wind."

"Wind could never make those sounds, sir."

"But I went to sleep in spite of the sound, and was awakened by the wildest shrieks in a man's deep voice."

"Again I threw wood on the fire and went out; but the shrieks had ceased, and I returned without discovering the cause."

"I forgot to say, sir, that I had hitched my horse securely in the shed, and in going to look after him when I first arose, I found him loose."

"Again I hitched him, and once more he was loose."

"Now, colonel, I did not again retire, but sat up smoking before the fire until day."

"The storm had cleared away, so that all was sunshine; but no track could I see, and all was as it had been the night before."

"I left the cabin and went to the Overland station, which Jake Reeves has charge of, and he greeted me with a story about Bob Burt having seen the Hercules Specter, and he also."

"What, before you had told your story?"

"Yes, sir, and the Hercules had ridden by his station in the moonlight, his horse making no sound with his hoofs, and Jake had opened fire as soon as he got his nerve back and been greeted with wild shrieks."

"This was when?"

"The night before the one I passed in the cabin, sir, and the same on which Bob Brent had seen the specter, as did also the passengers in the coach."

"While I was there, up dashed Cricket, the Pony Express Rider, and he had seen the specter also, and knew nothing of what Jake and Bob Burt had witnessed, but only that word had gone along the line that the Hercules had been killed by Butterfly Billy."

"It grows more interesting, Cody."

"Yes, colonel, and there is more to tell."

"I did not speak of my experience at the cabin to either Cricket or Jake, nor have I referred to it to any one here, sir."

"But I left the station anxious to solve the mystery, and soon after dark rode upon the Hercules myself, or whatever it is that resembles him."

"The moon was at its full, my horse gave a low whinny, and I saw distinctly the Hercules ride across the trail, not a hundred and fifty feet from me."

"I heard no sound of hoofs, only saw the man and horse, and the moonlight glimmering upon his uniform buttons and epaulettes."

"I called to him to halt, and spurred forward, and yet when I reached the spot he had disappeared in the thicket of pines."

"This is most remarkable, Cody; but heard you no clatter of hoofs?"

"None, sir; and more, I camped right there until the morning, when I hoped to find a trail."

"And you were a plucky fellow to do this, Cody."

"No, sir; I only was determined to know what it meant."

"And the trail?"

"I found none, or at least no marked trail that I could follow."

"And then?"

"I decided to return to the retreat of the Hercules."

"For what purpose?"

"To open the grave and see if the body was still buried there, for I felt convinced that the man, after all, had not been mortally wounded, but had escaped death, and for some reason was playing some game upon us."

"And you went to the retreat?"

"Yes, sir."

"With what result?"

"I opened the grave, sir, down to the body."

"It was there?"

"Yes, sir, I found the blanket wrapped around the large form in its uniform, just as I had laid it in the grave, and more I cared not to see, for it told me that the trick was at least not played by the Hercules Highwayman."

"Some of the Mounted Miners, perhaps, his allies in lawless acts."

"No, sir, I do not believe that they are his allies, and besides, men of the size of the Hercules are not often found."

"You are right; but what conclusion have you come to, Cody?"

"I do not know, sir, more than that Surgeon Delamater told me that Butterfly Billy will be able for the war-path in a couple of weeks, and then perhaps we can solve the mystery of the Hercules's ghost."

"I sincerely hope so, for this superstitious dread will spread like an epidemic, and I won't be able to get my soldiers to leave the fort after awhile," Colonel Carter said, half in earnest, half in a joking humor.

But all the officers were certainly impressed with what Buffalo Bill had had to say, for they knew him too well to feel that he was a man to be led away by a will-o'-the-wisp.

CHAPTER XIV.

BOB BURT ON THE ROAD.

No one who ever rode over the Overland with Bob Burt ever failed to like the large, fine-looking, whole-souled fellow.

He had a heart like a woman, yet possessed the courage of a lion.

Then, too, Bob Burt was the best driver on the road, and would go through the worst trails on dark, stormy nights, when the other men of the

whip would not dare venture away from a station.

Bob had been wounded more than once in rushing by road-agents when commanded to halt, and though threatened with death a hundred times, he yet lived on.

But Bob Burt was no fool, and he realized when all odds were against him in a flash, and wisely surrendered when there was no prospect of going through.

And when Bob Burt stated that he had seen the specter of the Hercules Highwayman, no one thought of doubting him for a minute.

If Bob Burt saw the ghost of the Hercules, then there was no use saying there were no such things as dead men's spirits walking the earth, was the verdict along the stations.

Some days after the conversation which Buffalo Bill and Colonel Carter had, Bob Burt started upon the run westward with several passengers.

One of these was a lady in black, and she wore a veil that completely concealed her face.

Bob Burt, when he was about to mount the box, saw his friend, Driver Dorsey, approaching to speak to him.

Dorsey had just brought the coach in to the dinner-station, and Bob was to carry it on.

"Any orders, pard?" he asked Dorsey.

"Yes, keep your eye on the woman in black, for she carries a big boodle."

"This order comes from the Boss in Omaha, and fight to save it if you are attacked."

"The fellow in the parson's outfit hain't no preacher, and he'll chip in and help yer out, if it comes ter shootin', for he's a pard o' the woman, but don't pretend ter know her on the road."

"See?"

Bob did see, and mounting his box drove off, knowing that he carried a valuable cargo along.

There were two other passengers aboard, both miners going back to the mines, so naturally almost dead broke, or would be by the time they reached the end of their journey.

"I hain't afeerd o' bein' robbed by the Hercules, now, but I is afeerd o' meetin' his ghosts, for I do be scared o' dead folks."

"Besides, if he were a-livin' he wouldn't seek ther woman, for that were not his way, and I guess his ghost hain't goin' ter do what ther flesh of it in life wouldn't do."

"But I hope we won't meet them durned Mounted Miners, for they'll take all thar is in ther lay-out and cuss 'em fer not havin' more."

"Dorsey says fight, ef we kin."

"Waal, I'll fight ef thar is ther photograph o' a chance."

"If not, then we has ter submit; but I prays we doesn't meet 'em."

So mused Bob Burt as he rode along on his high box, his horses going at a steady pace.

A halt was made at a supper-station, and the trail from there on was good up to the relay where Jake Reeves held sway.

It was just dark when the coach rolled away from Jake's, and he had told Bob Burt of Buffalo Bill's visit and what he had seen, and also what Cricket the Pony Rider had discovered in the way of the ghost of the Hercules.

So Bob was in an awed mood as he drove on, not from fear of the Mounted Miners, but from a dread of seeing that which he could not account for, the Specter of the Overland.

"Ther moon will be up in an hour, and thet is ther time thet ghosts do walk, I has heerd," he muttered, and on he drove.

The moon did come up as Bob had said, and the trail running around the side of the mountain was brightly lit up by it.

The moon was but a day on the wane, so its light falling upon the whitish rock of the mountains made all on the trail brightly visible, and Bob Burt kept his eye always ahead to pick out any danger.

The road was good there, winding in and out of heavy bowlders, and a couple of miles away descended into the shadows of the forest-clad valley.

To turn there would be impossible, and so Bob knew if the Mounted Miners were to halt him there he was in for it.

Suddenly his keen eyes detected several hundred yards ahead, two forms appear in the trail.

Then others were visible upon various rocks until Bob Burt counted six.

"Waal, we is in fer it, so I guesses I better give the signal ter fight, for it strikes me ef we open on 'em when they calls halt, we kin git away with 'em—and maybe not."

He was leaning over to warn those in the coach that the Mounted Miners were on hand, and that he would fight it out and drive through, when he saw four men in the rear.

These were mounted, and close at hand.

"It's no go," he muttered, and so he called out:

"Pards in thar! we has six road-agents ahead on foot, and four behind on horseback, so does yer say fight, or hand over yer chips?"

"I'm yer friend either way yer says, so shout."

CHAPTER XV.

THE SPECTER GUARD.

THE two miners in the coach were opposed to fighting the Mounted Miners.

They had no money to lose, so were willing to be robbed, and cared not to risk their lives for the property of others.

And they said so very decidedly.

This reduced the fighting force to Bob Burt and the parson, for the woman was not expected to fight, nor in fact was a man in clerical garb.

"As it is, pards, I kin only help yer on ther first round, for I'll shoot, and aim ter kill, and then drive through and my critters will give me all ther fun I want, yer see."

"So when I open the ball, yer must furnish ther music, and play it lively."

"How many are they?" asked the parson.

"Ten," responded Bob, who had drawn his horses down to a walk.

"Then we might fight, for—"

"No yer don't, yer don't git us hurted making a fool o' yerself, shootin' at ten outlaws," said one of the miners.

"I guess the odds is ag'in' us, pard, inside and out; but ef yer says fight, I says go, if it's death ter follow."

"What do you say?" and the parson turned to the woman in black.

"The odds are fearful; but leave it to that brave driver, and if he sees a chance and calls on us, why we will be ready."

"Perhaps they won't rob a woman," said one of the miners.

"Don't nurse yerself on thet idee, pard, for them is Mounted Miners, and they would rob ther grandmammy's coffin o' ther handles on it," said Bob Burt, leaning over the stage door.

"Well, driver, we leave it to you, and we are ready at your call," the parson said.

"All right, pard, I'll act on circumstances; but keep yer guns ready ter explode ef yer hears me shout," and Bob Burt drove on.

The Mounted Miners evidently knew by the coach horses being drawn down to a walk, that they had been seen, and a consultation as to resisting was going on.

But it did not disturb them, as the men on the rocks merely dropped down to shelter, and the two in the road maintained their position.

The four horsemen in the rear had slackened speed with the coach, so came on, yet no nearer than when first discovered.

The moon revealed the situation perfectly, and the coach rolled on once more at a slow trot toward the fate that awaited it.

The miners within seemed nervous, while the parson and the woman in black were perfectly calm, and sat side by side in silence.

Bob Burt was unmoved, but watchful.

The slightest chance he could discover of escape, even against odds, he was ready to take advantage of it, and his repeating rifle lay across his lap, under his knee-robe, where he could catch it up in a second.

Then, too, his reins had been knotted, and were ready to drop over the brake in an instant, while his rifle was seized, to be again taken hold of as his team started along.

"I hopes we'll git through, for it will be a feather in my sombrero, if them parties hain't looted," said Bob, quietly, as he drew near the spot where the two men stood in the road like statues, their revolvers ready.

That the other outlaws were in hiding and watching, Bob well knew, while a glance over his shoulder showed that the four horsemen were coming along at the same pace as before, ready to dash forward the moment the order was given by the leader to halt.

It was not long in coming, for soon the man on the right held up his hand, and called out:

"Hold up, Bob Burt, for you have booty along."

"You lies, yer road-thief, for I has only two bu'sted miners, a sky-pilot and a woman in black, an' ef yer kin git blood out o' sich turnips, yer is welcome ter try."

"Well, I can, for the woman in black is an army paymaster in petticoats, and the sky-pilot is his clerk, and they've got money by the thousands."

"Ha, ha, ha! Bob Burt, I'm onto your game

this time, and you'll see me get blood out of turnips."

"I kinder thought so; but ter resist would be sudden death."

"The Government has got ter charge, this loss ter the account o' ther Mounted Miners," muttered Bob Burt to himself.

But as the men advanced toward the coach a wild shriek suddenly appalled every one, as it went along the hills. It was immediately followed by startled cries from the horsemen in the rear.

On they dashed, the four outlaw horsemen, at breakneck speed, urging their horses to further efforts, while in their rear were the forms of the Specter Hercules and his horse in full pursuit, dashing right on toward the halted coach and the outlaws about it.

"The Giant General's Ghost! the Specter Highwayman!" broke in startled cries from the outlaws' lips, and in terror they fled down the trail to where their horses awaited them.

Bob Burt sat in awed silence, though the desire was upon him to fly, too, at sight of that wild horseman.

He could not, even at such a moment, control a laugh at the flight of the bandits, who were mounting their horses among the rocks and running down the trail at full speed, as no other means of escape was open to them.

"Go it, yer devils, fer Satan's ghost is a-huntin' yer sharp," yelled Bob.

Then up dashed the leading mounted outlaw, and he called out:

"Come! drive on with us. We'll not lose your prize even for the devil himself!"

But Burt was not to be bullied now, and the words were the last the man ever uttered, for the plucky driver promptly sent a revolver bullet through his brain.

His comrades fired a few shots, and then from the coach windows rattled others and two more of the mounted road-raiders went down under the fire of the "Woman in Black," and the "parson," Bob Burt's "sky pilot."

"Hoopla!" yelled Bob, sending a parting shot after the last of the outlaw quartette of horsemen; then he lapsed into dead silence and his eyes turned upon the spectral form coming along like the wind.

There was no clatter of the hoofs of his jet-black steed, only a muffled sound. The rider sat bolt upright, his uniform glittering in the moonlight, his white face ghastly in its hue, his eyes staring straight ahead, as he dashed by the coach.

It was an awful sight, this of the Specter Highwayman, and not one word was uttered as he passed, either by Bob Burt or those in the coach.

Away he sped on his way in silence until he disappeared in the distance.

Then Burt gathered up his reins and called out:

"Pards, what are your opinion o' thet?"

"It is unaccountable to me," answered the parson, while the woman made no reply.

"It do lay over any human cuttin' up I ever see," one of the miners responded.

Then Bob Burt called upon the three men to help him put the dead outlaws on the stage top, and drove on at a rapid pace.

He reached the valley and entered the shadows, but neither heard nor saw aught to alarm him.

Beyond the valley there was a stretch of several miles of open road again, and, as the coach rolled along Bob Burt called out:

"Ef them Mounted Miners hain't all sperits by this time, and got away from ther Hercules Specter, they'll be layin' fer us along this piece o' road— Thar, what did I tell yer?" and as he uttered the words the road-raiders rode into the trail not far ahead.

Almost at the same moment was heard that wild shriek in the rear, and once more the Specter Hercules was seen coming on at a rush.

And once more went the outlaws at a run, disappearing quickly from sight.

Past the coach again flew the Hercules, silent, upright as before, and when some distance ahead his horse was brought down to a slow pace, as he beckoned on the coach.

Burt obeyed, in silent awe, while he muttered: "When dead folks calls I obeys."

But, the Specter held his distance ahead until the coach reached the station nearest Fort M— where the parson and woman in black got out and entered an ambulance evidently sent there to meet them, for there was an escort of a dozen cavalrymen with it.

"My man, our specter guard saved the Government a large sum, for I am Paymaster Barber of the army in this disguise; but, how the Mounted Miners ever knew it I do not under-

stand," and the pretended woman in black pressed Bob Burt's hand, and with the parson sprung into the ambulance.

"As he says, thet Hercules did kinder act as a guard arter scarin' them outlaws nigh onto death."

"Yas, and I'm a leetle narvous over it myself," confessed Bob, as he seized the reins over a fresh team and went rolling along on his run through the mountains.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE OUTLAW CHIEF.

SOME two weeks prior to the attack of the Masked Miners upon Bob Burt's coach, and their being driven off by the Specter Hercules, a horseman rode slowly along the Overland Trail, stopping for meals and shelter at the various stations along the route, when hungry, and when night came on.

He looked like a man who was going West to seek a home, and had with him a pack-horse which trotted behind the animal he rode.

A man of fifty he appeared, with unshaven face of some weeks growth, gray hair worn long, and the dress of a miner.

He gave his name as Wolf, when asked, and looked like one who was by no means tidy or particular, while he spoke with a drawl and in border dialect.

After leaving Jake Reeves's station he turned off into a canyon and rode on as a man would who knew his way.

He held on until he came to a large spring, which was evidently the watering-place of buffalo, deer and wild animals from the mountains.

Halting for his horses to drink, he then passed on over the rocks beyond the spring and up into a canyon where a small cabin soon came in sight.

A man seated before the door sprung up at his coming, and seizing a rifle he leveled it.

But the stranger called out:

"Don't be a fool, Dermot, for I am your chief."

"Ah, chief, I am more than glad to see you."

"Get down and let me put your horses out to feed with mine."

This the horseman did, while Dermot led the animals away, after taking off the saddle and pack, and then returned and took a seat by the man whom he addressed as chief.

Dermot was a young man, in miner costume, and had a fearless face, yet with all a reckless look about it that was not prepossessing.

"Well, Captain Coyote, this is a surprise to see you," he said.

"Yes, and I came on important business to settle up, and also because I will be called away for an indefinite time."

"Any news yet of Yankee Kit?"

"Not a word, sir."

"Then he has either been killed, or he got the treasure I sent him after and run off with it."

"Kit would hardly go back on you, captain."

"Oh, yes, he would; but I sent him to Mexico to see what the bands there were doing, and told him, if he saw a good chance for a raid to make one with my Wolves into Texas, and then return with all the treasure they had saved and he could bring me."

"Since then I have not heard a word from him."

"He may turn up yet, captain."

"Well, I am that better off if he does; but now what have you done?"

"Business has been light of late, captain; but the men have had some pickings and I have a few thousands saved up."

"Over expenses and pay of the men?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I want it; but have you lost any men of late?"

"None, sir, only the devil is to pay along the trails."

"What is it?"

"Why that Black Horse Rider killed the Hercules, and since then his ghost has haunted the Overland."

"Don't be a fool, Dermot."

"It is true, captain, for I have seen the specter myself."

"I have heard of this specter all along the trail as I came; but it is sheer nonsense."

"No, chief, for you know that the Hercules kept to himself, though in the same business that we are; but since his death he has haunted us time and again until the boys stand in terror of him."

"They are fools; but I have a plot for you."

"Yes, sir."

"Back at the town I got in with a party

who is clerk to a Government paymaster, and the two were plotting to come to Fort M— and bring a large sum of money."

"The paymaster is a little fellow, so I suggested that he dress up as a woman, and his clerk as a parson, and that they would go through."

"This they will do, and they will go through on Bob Burt's coach four days from now, and you must hold them up and get their money, for they will carry some fifty thousand dollars with them."

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, chief, and it's a big sum."

"Yes, and I will share well with you Dermot, for I will frankly tell you that I intend to give up the road and live on what I have laid by."

"I am sorry of this chief."

"Well, you and the men risk the danger, and I have simply been serving in the towns as a spy."

"So you will be captain, if Yankee Kit does not return, and should he do so you will drop back to lieutenant of course."

"But this haul of the paymaster's will fix me all right, so I will give up outlawry and enjoy life."

"Now I have some other work for you to do."

"Certainly, chief."

"But first tell me if the Hercules is really dead?"

"Yes, chief."

"There is no mistake?"

"None, sir."

"Then what is all this talk about his still being seen on the trails?"

"It's his specter, they say."

"Bosh! it is the man himself, and I would like to see him."

"No sir, for Butterfly Billy killed him and Buffalo Bill buried him, so he is dead."

"It's a plot of Buffalo Bill's, or of that youth they call Butterfly Billy, mark my words."

"Chief, I am not a man to run from a shadow, and I have seen this specter several times, and so have many others."

"He does not rob or kill, simply rides by you; but he is awful looking and his horse at full speed makes no sound with his hoofs."

"Curse it! can there be something in superstition after all?"

"In this case, yes, chief."

"Well, I don't wish to see his ghost, and if he is dead you must do some work I meant to have him do."

"All right, chief."

"It is just this:

"On a certain date there will be a woman come through on the coach."

"You will give me the date?"

"Yes, exactly, and you will know the woman from my description."

"She is about thirty-six, and is very beautiful, with bronze red hair, perfect teeth, a very lovely face though an intensely sad one."

"Her eyes are large and dark, with long lashes, and her form is perfect, in fact she is a very beautiful woman, in spite of her appearing as though she had some deep sorrow in her heart."

"She will be dressed in black, not mourning though, and you are to make a clean sweep of the coach that day and I will tell you how."

"Yes, chief."

"Should you simply kidnap me, the soldiers would soon patrol the entire trail and drive you off; but at Breakneck Cliff you can do the work properly."

"You can halt them at the turn this side, and mind you, the woman is to go on with the rest."

"Yes, chief; but what is to be done with the others?"

"All are to be killed, not with bullets, but by taking the stage on to Breakneck Cliff and sending horses and all over it together."

"It must look like an accident," was the startling order of Captain Coyote, the secret chief of the outlaw band known as the Mounted Miners of the Overland.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAN OF DISGUISES.

THE outlaw lieutenant, bad as he was, seemed startled at the command of Captain Coyote.

"You mean that the woman is to go?"

"Yes."

"I never killed a woman, captain."

"You do not in this case; but rob them all, and then have men at the Breakneck to startle the leaders, and hurl the whole business over into the canyon below."

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."
 "Then you are to go down and see that no one escapes death by the fall, for there must be no tales told."
 "I see, captain."
 "I will, if possible, prevent any one going on that coach except the woman, and the driver won't count, for what is a *man's* life?"
 "Nothing to me; but a woman!"
 "Do you fear to do it?"
 "Oh, no; but the pay should be liberal, captain."
 "It shall be; but there must be no mistake."
 "There shall not be."
 "Now take my pack-horse, and you will find some presents for you and the boys."
 "Then we will square accounts, and I will go on my way, and you can have the horses if you will carry me half a hundred miles toward the mines."
 "I'll do it, captain," and an hour after the two men mounted and rode away together.
 "You still keep up the idea that you are all miners, Dermot?"
 "Oh, yes, chief, for in that is our safety, while if we kept together we would soon be run down."
 "Why, scouts and soldiers often visit our cabins, scattered through the mountains, while hunting for the Mounted Miners," and Dermot laughed heartily.
 When nearing the first mining-camps, the chief halted, seemingly knowing the country perfectly.
 "I will leave you here, Dermot, while you can go on and sell the horses as your own."
 "Remember, the paymaster disguised as a woman, with the clerk as a parson, will be through ten days from this, and just one week later the woman will come through who is to go over Breakneck in the coach, driver, horses, and all."
 "Yes, chief."
 "There must be no mistake, Dermot."
 "There shall be none, sir: but do you stop here?"
 "Yes; good-by."
 This was a hint to be left alone, and wondering why the chief stopped in that wild spot, Dermot rode on, leading the other horse.
 When he was out of sight the outlaw captain coolly took off his wig of gray hair, and the act revealed dark clustering curls, and that he was not an old man, hardly over forty.
 Then he took from a bundle a wig of red hair, and with some liquid from a bottle rubbed it over his dark growing beard, changing it to a brownish hue.
 Then from his bundle he took other clothes, a complete miner's outfit, well worn, and changed his own clothing for them, even to the boots.
 Wrapping the other things up in a bundle, he cast it into a crevice in the rocks, and went on his way.
 A walk of a couple of miles brought him to a wheel trail, and he seemed to be in luck, or to have calculated well, for a coach came in sight half an hour after, and halting it he got on the box with the driver, paid his fare, and went back over the same road he had come the day before, not recognized in his disguise.
 And ten days after, in one of the miners in Bob Burt's coach, when Dermot and his men held it up by moonlight on the mountain-side, was this same chief, though the other man was unknown to him, and only a chance acquaintance picked up for convenience.
 When the coach rolled on past the station, where the ambulance met it, the disguised outlaw was white with rage, for he had lost a clear fifty thousand dollars through the fear of his men of the Specter Hercules.
 He rode on in silence, pretending to be asleep, and was angry with himself for not having alone attacked the paymaster and his clerk, and then the driver.
 But the miner might have also turned upon him, and his life would have been the forfeit.
 He had come along to see if his men got the money, and just how much, and he cursed bitterly at the result; but he had had a chance to see the Specter Hercules, and had to admit that if not a ghost, he certainly had all the appearance of being one.
 At two stations beyond the chief left the coach, and plainly showed his miner friend that he wished to get rid of him.
 Then he took the next coach back, and kept on until he reached Omaha.
 It was night when the coach arrived, and sneaking away in the darkness, he wended his steps toward the river, where, on a bluff overlooking the Missouri, stood a pleasant-looking house.

Entering the gate, he ascended the steps and entered the house with a key he took from his pocket.
 A light burned brightly in the library, and there sat a woman, reading.
 A glance was enough to show that it was the one whom he had described to Dermot.
 She started up at his coming, but instantly recognizing him said:
 "Ah, Wolf, you come home in another disguise, and you frightened me."
 "Oh, when will it end, this fearful life?"
 "It would have ended this week had I not been foiled by a ghost," he said savagely, thrusting himself into a chair.
 "A ghost?"
 "Yes, an alleged specter, and though I don't believe in such things I had to admit, it puzzled me; but at any rate it frightened my men and I lost my game, so now I have got to make one more effort."
 "And then?"
 "We will go back to your home, as I told you, and I hope all will be well."
 "Heaven grant it; but oh, what a life we live here, Wolf, and who would believe that the respected Mr. Roy Wolf, a pretended cattle-buyer, was—"
 "Sh—! Don't talk so, Helen, but let me tell you that we must break up here, now."
 "Ah, and to go where?"
 "To California."
 "You are to go alone on a certain day, and I will follow you."
 "But, why, Wolf?"
 "Because I have a big scheme in hand that will make my fortune, and then farewell to this terrible life."
 "I am happy to hear you say that, Wolf; but go up to your room and change you disguise, while I get supper for you."
 He obeyed, and soon after the sleek-looking gentleman, with white hair, dark mustache, and dressed in black, who entered the room, and was known as Roy Wolf, the Cattle King, would never have been recognized as the rough-looking miner who came into the house an hour before.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"HELD UP."

FOR several trips after the one on which the Specter Hercules had acted as guard, Bob Burt found him still haunting the trail, and he came to feel that he was really a protection from the Mounted Miners, though he said:
 "I doesn't like to have a ghost fer a outrider."
 One day Bob Burt was starting out, and his face was strangely gloomy.
 He mounted his box, and called out that he was ready, and the three passengers sprung into the coach, the whip cracked and the journey was begun over the most dangerous part of the road, for it fell to the prince of drivers to have that run.
 Soon one of the passengers called out that he would like to ride on the box, and Bob drew rein and let him clamber up beside him.
 The passenger was a nice-looking gentleman, apparently one well to do, and said pleasantly:
 "You have a perilous road, my friend."
 "It's ther worst on ther line, sir."
 "You are a fine driver, though, and I suppose have few accidents?"
 "I has a hold-up now and then from ther road-agents, and a shot has cut into me now and then; but I is all broke up ter-day."
 "And why, may I ask?"
 "I laid off last run west, as I had ter help bury an old pard down at the station, so I got another driver, poor fellow, ter take my box for me."
 "Well?"
 "He were a good hand with ther reins, were Ben Bolt, but a leetle reckless, though he know'd ther road well, havin' driv it afore I did."
 "Waal, poor Ben, he must have taken a leetle too much, as he sometimes did, for when he come ter Breakneck Cliff, ahead o' here, an' which I'll show yer, he went over inter ther canyon with ther whole outfit."
 "No!"
 "I hain't a-lyin', pard, fer he did, horses, hearse, Ben and two passengers, one of 'em being a woman."
 "This was terrible."
 "So it were, pard, and all of 'em were kilt."
 "Some miners seen it, as they was coming along ther trail, and they went down and looked over ther wreck."
 "It were awful, they said, for horses and humans were that stove up yer could hardly tell 'em apart."
 "But they fished out their bodies and buried

'em, and took ther money and other things they had with 'em, on to the station like good, honest fellows they is, and reported what they had did."
 "They buried all the bodies there?"
 "Yes, and in thet canyon lies ther wreck o' my fine coach and ther bones o' my team o' grays, that was as fine a outfit as ever man held rein over."
 "I shall send East fer a slab o' marble ter put over Ben Bolt, and I'll hev cut on it ther names o' my horses, and say how it was did, jest as a monument, you know, pard, from a old friend."
 "And you have a good heart to do so, my friend; but do the road-agents trouble you much now?"
 "Not o' late trips, and fer a reason."
 "What is it?"
 "A ghost."
 "What?"
 "Fact."
 "A ghost?"
 "Sure."
 "What, do you believe in such things?"
 "Only o' late, pard."
 "Why do you now?"
 "I has seen a ghost! and more, thar is a ghost that acts as a guard to this coach, or did rather to my other one."
 "Tell me of it, please, for you interest me."
 "I guess so, for it are ruther interestin'," and Bob Burt told the story of the Specter Hercules.
 In an hour's time they came to Breakneck Cliff, and then Bob drew rein.
 It was a perilous place indeed, for the space on the shelf around the cliff was hardly three feet wider than the wheels, and just at that point the coach had gone over, for the marks on the rocks showed it.
 Far down in the valley was the wreck of the coach, and the bodies of the dead horses could be seen heaped together.
 Apart were three graves, and after glancing at them a moment Bob Burt said:
 "Pard, I started ahead, and druv fast jist ter halt here fer a look, so ef yer don't wish ter go down with me, ef yer'll hold ther critters I'll be obligated."
 "I'll go with you," said the stranger, and the other passengers were left in charge, while Bob Burt and his companion on the box went down into the canyon by the nearest path.
 "The grave apart are ther woman's, the miner said, and the outside one are poor Ben Bolt's," and Bob Burt took off his hat with reverence for his dead pard, while he said in a way that was characteristic of him, as he glanced up at the cliff:
 "But yer took a awful tumble, Pard Ben."
 "Well, ther hearse an' ther harness are but kindlin' now, and ther coyotes is already a-pickin' ther team, so we kin do no more good here, pard, havin' paid our respects to 'em, so let us go on our way."
 They climbed back up the path, and as they reached the coach were suddenly confronted by half a dozen men with leveled rifles.
 "Ther Mounted Miners, as I are a sinner," cried Bob, and he continued:
 "Hands up, pard, or you is bored full o' holes, for we is ketched in a trap like rats."
 "Well, Bob Burt, we meet again, and as the Specter Hercules does not ride by day, I'll be able to do some good pickin'."
 "I don't see thet yer'll get much, durn yer."
 "I only wish to interview this friend of yours, for he is my game," and the outlaw referred to the stranger who had gone to the canyon with Bob.
 "What do you wish with me?" said the stranger, with surprise.
 "Either that you pay me a certain sum now, or remain with me until a ransom is paid for you."
 "Come, give me your money, or write me out a check, for I can get it cashed in Omaha."
 "I have no money to speak of with me."
 "Your check is good, as I said, and I can send and get it cashed before you can get word there to stop it."
 "Come, yonder in my saddle I have a pen and inkstand, so do as I tell you."
 "I suppose I must," said the stranger, and then he asked quickly:
 "What sum do you demand?"
 "Ten thousand dollars."
 "I will not pay it."
 "Then you will have to die, my friend."
 "Hold! dead, the money is no use to me, so I will give it to you."
 "Come, and the man led the way toward his horse, two hundred feet away.
 "Well, I see by your clever capture, Dermot, that you got my letter?"

"Yes, chief, and I need hardly report that the coach went over the cliff with all in it."

"No; for I saw that by the wreck and graves."

"I took these things from the body, sir."

"Curse it, man! keep them, for I don't want them."

"I thank you, sir; but I am sorry we missed the paymaster's money."

"So am I; but you have my share of other robberies with you?"

"Yes, sir, for here it is in bills."

"Thanks; and now let me tell you that you are captain of the Mounted Miners, for I must go my way on a different path."

"Success to you, and good-by," and pretending to write something for a minute, the chief turned and walked back to the coach.

"Waal, pard, did he fleece you heavy?" asked Bob Burt, as the stage rolled on, with the two again on the box together.

"Not so badly, for I gave him a check on a bank I have not got a dollar in."

Bob Burt broke forth in a hearty laugh, and said:

"Waal, pard, all ther sharp ones hain't out here on ther border, be they; but whar is you going?"

"To California," was the answer, and the face of the outlaw wore a strange look—one that was unfathomable.

CHAPTER XIX.

A REMEMBERED FACE.

WHEN Paymaster Barber and his clerk arrived at the fort, and reported his adventure, and the fact that the Specter Highwayman had acted as a guard for the coach, thus saving the Government money from the Mounted Miners, it added more mystery to the haunting rider of the Overland.

"He seems to be atoning in the spirit by good acts, for his crimes in the flesh," said Buffalo Bill with a laugh, and Colonel Carter asked:

"Well, Cody, what is to be done about it?"

"I guess I'll have to ask for leave to go ghost-hunting, colonel."

"Your experience has not frightened you off from spirit-trailing then?"

"Not exactly; but I shall not go alone."

"Ah, misery loves company; but who will you ask to accompany you, for my command seems to be pretty much demoralized upon the subject of the Specter of the Overland?"

"Now if Surgeon Frank Powell were only here?" said the scout, referring to his boon border pard, or surgeon of the 5th cavalry, and one of the best prairie men on the frontier.

"Yes, if he were only here, then we could hunt down this ghost of the Hercules; but as he is not I must get some one else."

"How will I do, Mister Cody?"

All turned upon the speaker, and from each one came the name:

"Butterfly Billy!"

A tall, slender youth, perhaps under twenty, with a face that was bold, fearless, resolute and winning, and a form, though thin from suffering, showing activity and endurance, stood in the quarters of the colonel.

He was dressed in the gay attire of a Pony Rider, which had given him the name of Butterfly Billy, a scarlet cap and silk sash, a blue jacket adorned with buttons and silver lace, white corduroy pants stuck in handsome top-boots with tassels and gold spurs, a silk shirt, black cravat, buckskin gloves and a belt of arms.

He was a handsome picture, in spite of his pale, haggard face.

"How did you escape Surgeon Delamater, Master Butterfly Billy?" asked Colonel Carter approaching him.

"Oh, sir, he gave me permission to come and pay my respects to you, for I am well able to be about."

"And glad I am to see it, while I congratulate you upon your escape from what was certainly a very close call from death."

"Yes, sir, and death would have won in the first place, but for Scout Cody, and then again had not Surgeon Delamater shown such devotion to my case."

"I am as good as ever now, sir, only a trifle thin and weak."

All present shook hands with the handsome Black Horse Rider, who then asked again:

"Why cannot I go with you on this ghost-hunt, Mr. Cody?"

"What ghost-hunt?"

"Oh, I know all, for I have heard the whole story and it seems I have got to kill the Giant General over again."

"It's his specter now, Billy, and it has reformed, for he has not robbed a stage-coach since his death," said Captain Allen pleasantly.

"And they do believe it is a ghost, do they not?"

"Oh, yes, Buffalo Bill has both seen him and heard his groans."

"Well, I would like to meet this specter, for I am sure I would try the effects of a bullet upon him."

"Not even Cody seems to have thought of doing that," said the colonel with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"I'll think of it next time, sir," responded Buffalo Bill.

"He is mounted, is he not?"

"Just as he appeared in life, Billy, only his face is as white as snow," Cody returned.

"But I did not kill his horse, so how could he have the ghost of his horse?"

This question of Butterfly Billy caused all to laugh, and Buffalo Bill answered:

"I see, Billy, that you will have to go on the ghost-hunt with me, so how long will it take you to get strong enough?"

"I could go to-morrow, but give me a week."

"If Surgeon Delamater says so," the colonel remarked, and then he added:

"Come, Butterfly, Miss Ivy Allen is visiting my daughter to-day, and they will be glad to welcome you back from the borders of the Shadow Land."

"I will return in a minute, gentlemen," and Colonel Carter led the youth from his office into his home quarters and suddenly surprised two young ladies seated in a cozy sitting-room chatting together.

As Butterfly Billy crossed the threshold he heard his name upon the lips of Mattie Carter, and his face flushed crimson.

"Mattie, Miss Ivy, I have brought a visitor for you to entertain, but don't talk him into a fever again, for he is hardly himself yet," said the kind-hearted officer, and he retired, leaving the youth in the doorway.

The welcome he received certainly gladdened the heart of Butterfly Billy, and was better than any medicine he could take.

Both were beautiful girls, Ivy Allen just merging into twenty years, and a brilliant, witty, lovable woman, while Mattie Carter was just verging on "sweet sixteen," and pretty enough to turn the head and hurt the heart of any man.

After a pleasant half-hour with the young ladies the youth arose to depart, and as he did so a gentleman entered.

He was a man of distinguished appearance, hardly appearing to have lived two-score years, and with a darkly-bronzed, foreign-looking face that was striking and attractive.

His hair and eyes were black, intensely so, and a dark mustache, twirled up at the ends, shaded a mouth that was mobile and expressive in the extreme, while his teeth were even, solid, and of snow-whiteness.

He was dressed in the garb of a Mexican gentleman, and certainly was a grand-looking man, the cavalier *par excellence*.

"Don Emilio Soto, let me present to you, senor, the hero of Fort M—, whom we all know under the *sobriquet* of Butterfly Billy," said Ivy Allen, as the Mexican entered the room.

In a voice low, musical, but marked with a decided foreign accent, the Mexican said, as he extended his hand:

"I have heard of Senor Butterfly Billy, and it is a pleasure to meet him."

"We shall be friends."

The eyes of the youth looked straight into his own, and there was an expression in them that was unfathomable.

He even uttered no response to the polite words of the Don, but bowed and continued on his way out of the house.

"A handsome fellow, but spoiled by the admiration you ladies have heaped upon him," said the Don.

"Now you wrong him, for, on the contrary, he is not spoiled, Don Soto; but he is just up after a long siege of suffering from a wound that well-nigh proved fatal," said Ivy, warmly.

"Yes, he is no more spoiled than I am," Mattie Carter remarked, and the Don said in response:

"You must get some better comparison, Miss Carter, than yourself, as Miss Ivy will admit," and with a laugh Mattie left the room to let the lovers be alone.

When he left the house, Butterfly Billy met Buffalo Bill, and he said:

"Mr. Cody, who is Don Emilio Soto, of Mexico?"

"A Mexican gentleman of wealth, once an

army officer, and an old friend of Captain Allen and his daughter; in fact, I believe he is engaged to Miss Allen."

"I just met him, and, Pard Bill, I have met him before."

"Somehow it came upon me that we had met under feelings that aroused my hatred and fear, and I believe I was actually rude toward him before Miss Allen and Miss Mattie."

"You must be mistaken in the man, Billy, for he is a general favorite here."

"No, I know him, only I cannot, if life depended upon it, say when I have met him; but certain it is that I have reason to hate him, and that I'll swear to."

"He is engaged to Miss Allen, you say?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry, for that man is a villain, Pard Bill."

"Why, you are awful hard on him, pard, and I feel sure that you have confounded him with some one else."

"And I'll take oath that I have not; but let us go and decide upon a plan for this ghost-hunt, for I believe him the Hercules, and I will be only too glad if the man is not dead, for I wish to know what he can tell me."

Ten days after, the two, Buffalo Bill and the Black Horse Rider of the Overland, started upon the hunt for the ghost of the Hercules, and Butterfly Billy said in saying good-by to Colonel Carter:

"I will have my bonanza yet, sir."

CHAPTER XX.

LASSOING A SPECTER.

BUTTERFLY BILLY recuperated with wonderful rapidity, once he had been allowed to step outside of Surgeon Delamater's hospitable home.

The truth was that the skilled surgeon had feared that Butterfly Billy might overtax himself, and so he had held him down days after he was really able to be about, and built him up all in his power at the same time.

When he saw that the wound was really healed, and the Black Horse Rider was himself again, he allowed him to leave his quarters and go over to visit the colonel, well aware that Ivy Allen and Mattie would do much to hasten on his recovery.

From that day Butterfly Billy rallied wonderfully, and when he rode away with Buffalo Bill one night, to hunt down the ghost of the Hercules, he expressed himself as feeling as well as ever before, and that several days' work would soon harden him up to his old strength and style.

"Well, Billy, what is your little plot to start on, for I know you have formed one, and if I do not like it, I will tell you my plan?" said Buffalo Bill, as the two awoke the next morning after their first camp.

"This man must be taken alive, Pard Bill."

"You still believe that you did not kill the Hercules?"

"Certainly, for who else could it be that is masquerading as a ghost?"

"That's what puzzles me, Billy."

"Well, the man must be taken alive?"

"Yes."

"He certainly travels the Overland?"

"Sure."

"And if his retreat is not the old one, then he has some other spot to hide in."

"Certainly."

"Now let us go to the old retreat, or rather, do you remember a chasm in the rocks on the way there?"

"I do."

"It is some twenty feet high, and about forty wide."

"I remember."

"There are cedars on the top of the rocks, and through this chasm the man must pass, if the old retreat is still his hiding-place."

"You are right."

"Then let us find a place near to hide our horses in, visiting them to change their feeding-ground each day, and take up our camp upon those rocks, you on one side, I upon the other."

"I begin to see."

"If the Hercules does not pass through within a few days, he certainly has changed his retreat, and we can find some place upon the Overland to also lie in wait for him in the same manner."

"Correct, Billy."

"You can make your lariat fast to a tree, and throw for the horse, while I can secure mine and catch the rider, and thus we get both by throwing at the same instant."

"With you holding him covered from the rocks, I can slip around and disarm and iron him, do you see?"

"Perfectly, and there is no need of proposing

my plan, which was to trail him home, for his horse must make some mark, if his feet are muffled.

"We will head for the chasm at once, Billy."

Soon after the two friends were on their way to the spot selected by Butterfly Billy for his plot to be carried out against the Hercules.

A mile from there in a sheltered vale which no one would enter except for a like purpose as theirs, they found plenty of water and grass for their horses, and soon had their animals picketed out with line enough to feed for twenty-four hours.

Then, too, they were placed so that they could get to the water near if they wanted to.

Hiding their saddles and bridles near, they went on foot toward the chasm.

Examining the pass searchingly, they discovered that there were tracks here and there made by the hoof of a horse.

"I think you are right, Billy," said Buffalo Bill, and they climbed up the rocks upon one side.

They found a tree to which they could make one end of the lariat fast, and beneath it a temporary camp was made.

The lariat was then fastened by one end, and the other with the noose, and then coiled, was placed near the edge of the rock, which looked over into the pass.

Here was Butterfly Billy's stand, and then the two went to the other side, and Buffalo Bill was soon fitted out in his temporary camp, with the trap ready to spring upon the ghost of the Hercules, should he pass that way.

Their provisions were then cooked, away back in the hill, their canteens filled with water, and by sunset they were on watch, they having arranged between them to relieve each other on duty.

The night passed away in quiet, except that they heard a muffled sound like hoof-falls, but it was so intensely dark there in the shadow, that they could not see a form if it passed through the chasm.

The morning passed, and noon came, and as the sun began to brighten they heard a loud, shrill whistle in the distance.

Then an answer came, strangely near, from just beyond a clump of cedars, and yet they had heard no sound of any footfall approaching.

Soon after the further whistle was repeated nearer, and the nearest one further away.

It told both the watchers that the signal had recalled the one who was going toward the pass.

But they could do nothing but wait, and then a moment after was heard the sound of voices.

Still as death and watchful, the two waited for the next act in what might soon become a tragedy.

Soon the voices ceased, and there came, not long after, around the thicket of cedars, a horseman.

It was the Hercules, mounted upon his huge black horse.

The shadows in the pass had deepened, for the sun was nearing the horizon, but there was no mistaking the gigantic forms of the Giant General and his steed.

In full uniform, with military trappings upon his horse, bolt upright in his saddle, and with his wide-brimmed sombrero not wholly hiding the whiteness of his face, the Giant General came on.

Suddenly he halted, and just beneath the man-trap set for him.

For a moment he seemed about to turn back, for he half turned his horse, and then, as if decided upon his movements, he started on his way once more.

As he did so there came a buzzing sound, and the two coiled lariats shot forth and downward.

Buffalo Bill and Butterfly Billy's lariats were thrown unerringly, and man and horse were taken fairly.

The Specter of the Overland and his steed were caught.

CHAPTER XXI.

A RED-SKIN PARD.

HAD Buffalo Bill not been in such alarm for the life of Butterfly Billy, he would have seen, when he rushed to his aid at the retreat of the Hercules upon the hill-top that day, that there was some one else near, other than the fallen man, the wounded youth and himself.

That he had also been called to the scene by the shots fired, but he had not arrived by the trail upon which the scout had come.

Above the hill-top, and across a deep chasm or rent in the hills, was a higher peak, running back into a range of inaccessible hills.

This chasm, or rent was scarcely over twenty

feet in width and some feet higher than the hill upon which was the cabin of the Hercules.

On the other side was a border of scant bushes, trees and vines that had long grown there it seemed.

Upon the other side, and looking down upon the lower hill appeared the form that had come at the sound of the shots.

It was an Indian, yet not a Sioux, for his costume and appearance indicated the Comanche far away from the hunting-grounds of his own people.

He glanced at the scene, and yet from his point of observation and the trees on the hill-top, could not see what was going on.

So he remained silently waiting, and watching all he could.

At last he saw the tall form of a man going down the steep trail leading the black horse of the Hercules, and upon the animal's back was what appeared to be a wounded Indian.

Waiting until they had disappeared in the valley, and all was silent upon the hilltop, the Comanche began to perform strangely.

He first pulled back from the brink of the cliff a few bushes, which were now seen to be growing in a hollow log that looked like the edge of the rocks.

This log was upon rollers, sawed off of small saplings, and it was not hard work to roll it out of the way.

Beyond the open space rested a long, narrow bridge, with railings on either side.

It was a rude, crude structure, but strong and readily handled by ropes, which looked like grapevines fastened to the further end.

A windlass back among the trees set the bridge in motion, and it passed out over the cliff and was lowered to the edge of the chasm on the lower hill.

Thus the chasm was spanned by a frail-looking but yet strong bridge, over which a horse could cross in safety.

Down this the red-skin went, before Buffalo Bill had gotten fairly out of sight, and he held in his hand a repeating rifle.

Approaching the cabin, he did it with the caution of his race, peered in, then glanced about him, and uttered an exclamation as his eyes fell upon the newly-made grave.

Quick as a flash he sprang toward it, and dropping his rifle, began work to throw off the barriers on top, put there to keep off the wolves, and to fairly tear the earth out of the grave.

Unceasingly he worked, and with an energy that soon brought him to the body below.

The earth was thrown from the blanket, and then with a strength that was wonderful, the form within was dragged from the grave, yet warm, and stranger still, gasping for breath.

The red-skin seemed not to be unnerved by his discovery, for he threw off the blanket and saw that the Hercules was *not dead*!

Into the cabin he dashed, and obtaining a cup, got water from a spring near, and dashed it into the face of the gasping man.

At last the eyes opened and met those of the red-skin.

"Red Dog!"

He spoke the name hoarsely, and with surprise.

"Yes; the Red Dog saw the foes of the Big Chief, and came.

"They had put him in the grave."

"Ah, yes," and the man shuddered.

"They thought I was dead; but I saw only the boy."

"The Long Hair was here."

"Buffalo Bill! Well, they did not kill me, for I yet live."

"But the boy?"

"The Long Hair took him away upon the horse of the Big Chief."

"Curses on it, they have nearly killed me, buried me alive and robbed me of my horse."

"But I was shot here, and yet my head pains," and the Hercules put his hand first upon his broad heart, then upon his head.

"Ah! the bullet entered here, for here is the wound; but I can feel with my finger that it glanced on the rib just over my heart; but the shock knocked me down and in falling my head struck a rock and stunned me."

"See, here is a cut upon my head, Red Dog; but I am not dead yet."

"Let the Big Chief go to the high hill."

"You are right, Red Dog, for they may come back."

"Ah! I have it, we will play that I am dead."

"Come, you must help me, for I am as shaky as an old toper."

He rose with difficulty, though aided by the chief, and with an effort crossed the bridge to the higher peak.

Then, back in the undergrowth was a plateau, with a spring sending a small stream out over the hill in a fall, while grass was in abundance.

A large black horse was picketed out to feed, and not far away another, a roan.

A cabin was among the rocks, well-built and comfortable, and a good shelter for the horses.

This was the real home of the Hercules, the cabin on the lower hill being but a blind, should he be trailed there.

"I must get to bed, Red Dog, and you can dress my wounds."

"The bullet has lodged in my back somewhere, so will do no harm, and my skull is not fractured; but with the two wounds and the burying, I am badly used up."

The Comanche proved himself equal to the task, and when the Hercules was in bed and feeling easier, he said:

"Red Dog, I must be supposed to be dead, that is certain."

"I noticed that Buffalo Bill did not even take my arms, so he will come back for them."

"I recognized the boy, disguised as he was as a young Sioux chief, as the Pony Rider, and he may have had only the scout with him, and yet there may be more."

"Now do not touch a thing in, or about the cabin, leaving all as he saw it; but mount your horse and go to the cabin of the Mounted Miner they call Baby Bill."

"The big white giant?"

"Yes, for he is very little smaller than I am, and might pass for me if not looked at too close."

"You have threatened to kill him because he knocked you down one day, so you can get the chance."

"Red Dog glad."

"Tell Baby Bill that I want to see him, that I have a job for him to help me with."

"Guide him here, and when he is here just kill him."

"Good! heap good!" said Red Dog.

"Shoot about where this wound in my side is, and then give him a lick on the back of his head."

"I will then try and help you dress him up in my old uniform, and we can plant him in the grave, wrapped in the blanket they had around me, and if they open it to see if the Giant General is really dead, they'll be convinced, for no one will know the difference."

"Heap, much heap good," said the tickled Comanche.

After giving his faithful red-skin pard a few more instructions, the Hercules saw him mount the roan horse and ride away on his tragic errand.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SUBSTITUTE.

BABY BILL was an overgrown, awkward fellow, who, at a glance might be mistaken for the Hercules, but not after more than a casual inspection.

He was about the same height and weight, and his hair, eyes and beard were black, the latter were about the same length.

In fact, Baby Bill had been told by his outlaw companions that he resembled the Giant General, and he aped him all he could.

He was one of the gang of mounted outlaws, who, originally a dozen without their chief, had lately been cut down to an alarming extent, and when Red Dog went after him on his fatal errand, had dwindled to Dermot and six men.

The Mounted Miners lived far apart in cabins, pretending to be miners, and only assembled for lawless work upon the call of their chief.

Baby Bill's cabin was not very far from the retreat of the Hercules, only a few miles, and he was found at home by Red Dog, who was known to the band as the red-skin pard of the Giant General.

The Comanche delivered the message with the gusto of one who had something good in store for the outlaw, and Baby Bill mounted his horse, also a large black animal, to further imitate the Giant General, and followed him on the trail to the retreat.

Not one of the Mounted Miners had been let into the secret of where lay the retreat of the Hercules, and Baby Bill felt flattered that he was to have so much confidence placed in him.

"Where is the General, Comanche?" he asked.

"Home."

"At his retreat?"

"Yes."

"Do you intend to take me there?"

"Yes."

"Ah! the general can trust me."

"Oh, have heap trust in big Baby Bill—love him."

"I am glad that he believes me his friend, and you, Red Dog, must be my friend too, for I am sorry I hit you that day."

"Red Dog heap sorry too."

"But you know the Bible teaches—"

"No know about pale-face Great Spirit; hear of Him, but know red-skins' great chief."

"He is the same, Red Dog; but let me tell you that the Great Spirit teaches us to forgive our enemies and to forget how they have hurt us."

"Ump! Red Dog forgive and forget, but he remembers," was the reply of the Comanche.

"Well, we are to be friends now, friends unto death."

"Yes, he heap good friends until Big Baby Bill die," was the reply, and the victim saw not its hidden meaning.

So on the red-skin led the way, through the pass, over the water-washed rocks and then up the steep trail to the peak above.

He stopped for an instant and listened attentively.

Some sound had caught his keen ears; but, after awhile, as though reassured, he led on up to the peak where the cabin stood.

"Well, this is a snug retreat," said Baby Bill admiringly, and then his eyes fell upon the open grave.

"Ha! what is that for, Red Dog?"

"Big chief have fight, going to bury a foe."

"Ah! but where is he?"

The Indian led the way to the bridge, which had been left spanning the chasm as the Hercules was not then able to raise and lower it into place.

"Lordy! I can never cross there."

"Oh yes."

"But my horse will not."

"Blind his eyes, see! I lead him."

The Indian started his roan across, and by putting something over the eyes of the black of Baby Bill the animal tremblingly allowed himself to be led over to the other side.

"This is a dizzy-looking crossing, Comanche," said Bill as he followed and he gave a sigh of relief when upon the other side.

"Well, I really appreciate this kindness in the general, letting me into the secret of his home," and the outlaw followed the Comanche on toward the other cabin.

But, as they neared it the Comanche stopped and said:

"Big chief there!"

He pointed toward the cabin, and as the outlaw passed on he received a stunning blow, from a rock held in the hand of the red-skin.

With a groan he dropped to his knees, when a revolver was thrust near his left side, and with the touch of the trigger the bullet entered his heart.

"Him dead, big chief," called out the Indian, and out of the cabin, with great effort, though, the Giant General dragged himself.

"Yes, he will fill the bill exactly, or rather the grave. Now to rig him up as the Giant General!" he said.

This was done after considerable trouble, and then the powerful Comanche shouldered the heavy load and went back to the lower peak, while the Hercules gladly returned to his cot in the cabin once more.

Wrapping the dead form in the blanket which Buffalo Bill had used, and taking the loose earth from the grave, the Comanche placed the still warm form at length in it, just as he had found his white comrade lying.

Then he filled the grave in carefully, taking pains to leave all as he had found it, and placed the logs over it as Buffalo Bill had done.

Not a thing was left undone to avoid attracting attention to the grave's having been opened and refilled.

The rifle, sword and other things were left just as the Giant General had told the Comanche to let them remain, and then he started upon his return to the upper hill.

Destroying any hoof-marks that were there, he crossed the bridge and then proceeded to haul it into place by means of the windlass.

The log with its bushes was rolled back into place, and all looked as it had before, so that the Comanche felt satisfied with his work, and started on toward the cabin to receive the praise of the Hercules.

But his ear had not deceived him, when he had halted on his way to his retreat, for there two pair of eyes were watching him.

And now, as he walked away toward the cabin where lay the wounded Giant, the same eyes were upon him, for those who were watching him had trailed him over across the bridge, and were then secreted upon the upper peak, biding their time to act, and thus far they seemed masters of the situation.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TRAILED DOWN.

THE two persons who had from a movement of their horses in the timber, attracted the alert attention of Red Dog the Comanche, had caught sight of the outlaw and his red guide at the very instant the Indian stopped to listen.

They remained silent and watched, and gave a sigh as they passed on.

Then one said to the other:

"Look, Massa Ashley, what dat big man yonder?"

"I saw him," was the suppressed reply, and as the Indian and outlaw disappeared in the distance the one who had last spoken continued:

"We must follow them at once."

"Yes, massa."

And on the two rode, out into the trail and on after those who had passed by a few minutes before.

Arriving at an opening they drew their horses back hastily, for on ahead they saw the Indian and the outlaw climbing up the steep trail to the ridge.

Then on they went, when those they followed had disappeared, until they reached the base of the ridge, and here they hid their riding-horses and the led animal and continued on their way afoot.

They saw for an instant a form disappearing over the ridge of a higher hill.

It was the outlaw just crossing the bridge over the chasm.

Seeing the cabin they expected to find some one there, and the open grave seemed to move them with anxiety.

But they pushed along across the bridge and just had time to hide in among the rocks, when they beheld the Indian returning.

He was staggering along under a limp form clad in military attire.

"My God!" broke from the lips of one of the two, and the other's hand was laid firmly upon his shoulder, and the words were whispered:

"Wait, massa, wait."

And then they crouched for a long time, while the Comanche crossed the bridge with his burden and placed it in his grave.

Then he returned, drew up the bridge and disappeared in the direction of the center of the hill without dreaming that eyes were upon him, that the secret retreat of the Hercules had been invaded.

"What does it all mean?"

"I dunno, massa; but we kin foller dat Injun now, and if I don't mistake he are a Comanche we knows."

"He is a Comanche, yes, and there is something familiar in his bearing; but what is he doing here?"

"Don't yer recommember, massa, Red Dog de Comanche chief dat run off with Apache girl, and his people goin' ter kill him, and he stop at de ranch, and his poor young squaw was so sick, and you nursed her until she died, and bury her on de stream?"

"Yes, it is Red Dog, I believe."

"He an Red Dog, massa, for he went away and folks say he was kilt; but he pretty lively Injun now."

"Then Red Dog should be *his* friend, not his foe."

"Yes, massa, but I hain't so sart'in dat was him."

"Then we must find out."

"Come, for the sun is near its setting, and we have no time to lose."

"Dat's a fact, massa," and with this the two started on once more, following what was now seen to be a well-beaten path further into the ridge.

After a walk of a couple of hundred yards, they came in sight of a cabin, and there, seated before it was the large form of the Giant General, half-reclining in a rustic chair.

His eyes were closed, and he was awaiting the return of the Indian, who had gone further along the ridge in search of some herbs with which to dress the wounds of the white man.

"It is he!"

The words came hoarsely from the lips of the speaker, and the other replied confidently:

"It am, for a fact, so we has trailed him down sart'in, massa."

"You go forward, for he will recognize you at a glance, and tell him that I am here only if you believe he would care to see me; but if you think he will not, then slip away and come back to me, and I will go away—yes, I will go away."

Thus urged, the one addressed moved out of the thicket, and approached the cabin.

His step aroused the Giant General, who sprung to his feet, with the words bursting from his lips:

"Black Sampson! you here?"

"Yas, massa, I am here, sah, and I am awful proud to see you, sah, I is indeed," and the huge negro grasped the hand of his white counterpart and wrung it warmly.

"My God, Sampson! when did you get here—how did you get here, and where are you from?"

"Slowly, massa, slowly, fer you is overfloodin' me with questions, sah."

"I got here, sah, half a hour ago, by seein' a Injun I takes fer Red Dog comin' along, and I follows him."

"He didn't see me, so I slipped across de bridge, and here I is, sah."

"And where are you from?" and the Giant was quivering with emotion as he asked the question.

"From Ranch Eden, sah."

"And why have you come, sir?" came the stern query.

"Waal, massa, I came ter find you, sah, and I has been six months a-doin' it, too."

"What do you want with me, *now*?" and the last word was uttered with deep pathos.

"Waal, sah, you jist made a mistake, some years ago, and I come to tell you of it."

"A mistake? My God, yes, I loved one who was unworthy, and that mistake has warped my nature, made a devil of me," was the bitter response.

"Massa, you is a little too fast, fer yer didn't love no one who was unworthy, as I has come ter prove to yer, sah."

"By the God above, man, prove this and I'll give you a fortune," and the words rung out like a trumpet.

"Waal, sah, you thoughted when Missy Ellen's fambly was a massacred by the Comanches, dat all of 'em was kilt dead and burned up; but yer see, sah, her brother Arthur he went a-lookin' fer her, and he escaped ther massacre, but were took prisoner, and gittin' away went to ther fort and they made him an officer, and one day met a old trapper, Buckskin Bill, and got to talkin' over old times, and found out his sister was a-livin' and had been found by you on ther pararer, so he come ter see her one night and—"

"God forgive me! but he never can!"

The words came with a wail of bitterness from the heart of Sol Soulette, and he dropped back in his chair and buried his face in his hands, while his whole form shook with emotion which nearly overwhelmed him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FORGIVEN.

THE large honest eyes of Black Sampson filled with tears, as he gazed upon the anguish his master suffered, and he stood looking upon him without knowing what to say or do.

The Giant sobbed like a child for some minutes and then looking up asked softly:

"I killed him?"

"Yes, Massa Sol?"

"And my poor wife?"

"You wounded her, sah, but she got well."

"Heaven, I thank Thee!" and the head was again bowed.

"Massa, you is wounded, sah, and—"

"It is nothing; but tell me, did she send you to find me, to tell me how she hated me?"

"No, no, sah, for missy understand it all."

"She got heap good horse, senor, sah, and she know you thoughted her folks was all dead, and Carlos he afterwards tell her how he told you dat dere was a officer visitin' missy, and she recommember how a lieutenant camped near de ranch made you jealous 'cause he like her, so she jist know'd you thought she wasn't no good wife no longer and in your temper kill him."

"She done forgive you, sah, right away."

"Could I believe it?"

"It are Gospel, sah, for missy didn't send me, sah, for she come herself," and Black Sampson put his finger to his lips and gave a peculiar, ringing signal.

It was promptly answered, and the next moment out of the cedar thicket bounded a slender form, clad in the buckskin suit of a man.

But in spite of the male attire, and short, curling hair, Sol Soulette knew his wife and sprung toward her, while Sampson hastily walked away and a few moments after nearly scared Red Dog to death by coming upon him face to face in the thicket path.

It was lucky for Sampson that Red Dog momentarily took him for the Devil, or in other words the Great Evil Spirit, and dared not raise a hand against him, and in the moment of hesitation the negro called out:

"Hullo, Red Dog, don't you know de nigger who was yer friend in Texas, at massa's ranch, and yer called Big Black Chief?"

"Me know, and glad to see Big Black Chief," and Red Dog gave a sigh of relief that his head was not in the grasp of the Evil Spirit.

Then Black Sampson, in his own peculiar way told of his coming with his young mistress in search of Sol Soulette, and the surprised Indian was detained for half-an-hour, until twilight was falling.

Then picking up his herbs, which he had let fall in his fright, he went on to the cabin with the negro.

There sat Sol Soulette and his wife, hand-in-hand, and as the two approached the Giant said:

"See, Red Dog, I have found my squaw, or rather she has found me.

"And, Sampson, I am a new man now, and from to-day bury my old life of crime.

"I was not myself, I was mad, desperate, and I have done many a wrong and crime; but I have confessed all to my wife, and she has forgiven me, so I begin a good work of at once ridding these mountains of the outlaw band known as the Mounted Miners, and then restoring another poor woman to one who loves her.

"This done, we will all four go to the dear old ranch in Texas, and see if happiness will not come to us."

"But, Sol, how can you do what you say, and rid this country of the outlaws?" asked his wife.

"You know I am supposed to be dead, Ellen, and so I shall play ghost, and thus frighten them off the trail.

"Come, Red Dog, build a fire, and you, Sampson, give us a fine supper, for I declare I hardly feel my wounds now, my joy is so great in feeling that this dear little woman, whom I so sinned against, has forgiven me, has tracked me down, and made a new man of me, for just as soon as I can decide upon the best plot to carry on the good work, I shall begin it."

CHAPTER XXV.

A COMPROMISE.

THOUGH taken by surprise when captured by the lariat of Butterfly Billy, and with the noose of the scout's rope around the neck of his horse, the Giant General was not a man to submit tamely, and he had begun a powerful resistance, when the Pony Rider called out:

"If you do not submit, General, I will kill you!"

"Ah, it is you, is it, my brave Black Horse Rider?"

"You are the very man I wish to see, and my hands are up."

The action was suited to the words, and Butterfly Billy had already reached the chasm and looked at the sudden submission of the man with surprise, yet with suspicion also.

"You surrender?"

"With pleasure, for I was hoping to meet you."

"You say so now."

"Oh no, I mean it, for I am not the man I was two months ago, when we met up near my cabin, boy."

"But you look a trifle thin, yet I am glad my bullet did not kill."

"It was a clever plot of yours, Butterfly, and well-nigh ended me, only my ribs are hard and the bullet glanced."

Butterfly Billy gazed at the man in amazement.

He did not fear him, as he knew Buffalo Bill covered him with his rifle.

Then the Giant said:

"Come, take my arms, and let us talk together, for I have something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Who is at the other end of the lariat that holds my horse?"

"A tree."

"A tree didn't throw it?"

"No; Buffalo Bill."

"Am I your prisoner, or Buffalo Bill's?"

"Mine."

"Your word goes, then?"

"Yes."

"Call him here."

Butterfly Billy did so, and the scout approached, and the outlaw said:

"I have a story to tell, Cody, and this youth will be the gainer by it."

"I do not defend my acts, but I shall tell you both the whole truth, and all that made me what I am."

"You see me now, with whitened face, and india-rubber belting on the hoofs of my horse, to deaden all sound, thus playing the part of a

ghost, and yet, since I have thus done so, you cannot point to one lawless act of mine.

"Instead, I have kept the Mounted Miners from robbing the coaches, as you must know, and this change has come about through a woman, as you shall now hear."

Then the two listened to the strange story of the remarkable man, and what had made him a wanderer, and in conclusion he added:

"My noble little wife is now at my retreat, with the negro Sampson, who was her escort and guard, and the Comanche whom I told you was my friend."

"Come with me and see them, spending the night there, and to-morrow I will guide you to the cabin of Dermot, the present captain of the Mounted Miners."

"He knows where his chief is to be found, and when you find him you will discover your mother, for I now know that she is not dead."

"But Dermot is a good fellow, and you must let him go, but the others you can hang."

"For myself, I ask to go my way, and let me be still thought to be dead, and thus will I pass out of memory."

"Do you grant my requests, Butterfly Billy, if all is as I say?"

"I do."

"Then come with me to my retreat, and I guess we will find my wife on the lower ridge, for she came after me nearly this far to tell me to whiten my face, which I had forgotten to do."

So the scout and the Overland Detective mounted their horses and rode on to the retreat of the outlaw.

As he had said, they overtook at the lower cabin his wife, and then they could doubt no longer, when he said:

"Ellen, these were my foes; but I hope they will be my friends, for I have told them all."

The clever means of hiding his retreat was then shown by Sol Soulette, and that night the Scout and Butterfly Billy passed in the outlaw's home.

The next morning the four started for the cabin of Dermot.

The outlaw, in his uniform, went on ahead and surprised Dermot in his cabin, for up to that moment the young captain had believed in the specter of the Giant General.

In a few words he told Dermot all, and then called the scout and Butterfly.

The outlaw was nervous, for he hardly knew what to expect, but at last he said:

"The lady is the chief's wife, sir, and he has been living with her, and playing the part in Omaha of a rich cattleman, while he was spy for our band."

"He told me he was going to give up the life and made me chief, and plotted with me to take the life of his wife, and I carried out half the plot in sending Ben Bolt and his stage over Breakneck Cliff, but I took the lady out beforehand, and she has returned to Omaha, while I pretended she was in an empty grave in the canyon, for I buried the driver and other passengers."

"I can take you to her address, sir, for I could not kill a woman."

Butterfly Billy was deeply moved, and asked:

"And your chief?"

"I tracked him, sir, and he has gone to Fort M—, where he is known as Don Emilio Soto, a Mexican, but he is none other than Captain Coyote, who was an outlaw in Mexico, then in Texas for years, and kidnapping your mother, he forced her to marry him, I believe."

Butterfly Billy asked to hear no more, but said:

"I will go with you to Omaha at once, and you, Pard Bill, can go to Fort M— and tell all to Colonel Carter and Captain Allen, for Miss Ivy must be saved from that demon."

"When he is your prisoner, I will be back to deal with him."

"Now, Mr. Soulette, you are free to go your way, as I promised, and I advise you to depart from this country at once, making your way as you best know how."

"Farewell."

He held out his hand and it was grasped by Sol Soulette, who suddenly turned on his heel and walked away in silence.

Ten minutes after Butterfly Billy was on his way along the Overland Trail to Omaha, accompanied by Dermot.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

THE people at the fort were a little startled to see Buffalo Bill come back alone, and then, after a long talk with Colonel Carter, to depart on a

fresh horse and accompanied by Captain Allen and a dozen soldiers.

Don Emilio Soto had also accepted the invitation of Captain Allen to accompany him, and some days after the party returned to the fort with two prisoners, the last living members of the Mounted Miners band.

And Captain Don Emilio was not with them, for, so the story went, he had been killed in action with the outlaws.

And this was true, as to his being killed by an outlaw; but Buffalo Bill had taken good care to put the pretended Mexican in a position, after he had discovered the outlaws in camp, where a volley from them would kill him.

"If they fail, I will be a little reckless in my shooting, for Miss Ivy's secret shall be kept from all who would sneer at her having loved an outlaw," the scout muttered.

But the volley of the outlaws, when surprised, did the work, and Don Emilio was buried where he fell, and even Ivy Allen never knew his true character.

Nor did she mourn much, as she had never loved the man, and within a year she married a handsome young lieutenant on the staff.

Then Buffalo Bill went on the trail for Omaha, and rode through with Bob Burt.

He soon found Butterfly Billy there, and the first question asked was:

"Pard Bill, what of him?"

"Don Emilio is dead," and Buffalo Bill told his story.

"Now, Bill, let me take you to see my mother, for she is here, and Dermot has gone his way."

"But first let me say that which cuts me to the heart, for that man was *Wolf Royal, my own father!*

"He treated my mother shamefully, deserted her when I was but four years of age, so you see I remembered his face, and we went and found a home in Texas."

"When he raided our home with his outlaws and I captured him, leaving my mother to guard him, he told her that he would have his men kill me if she did not go with him."

"She went, to save me, as she believed, and all these years she has suffered torments, and all to keep him from carrying out his threat and going to Texas to kill me, for he never knew in Butterfly Billy his own son."

"Now you know all, so come and meet my mother."

And the scout did meet the almost broken-hearted woman, and when he told her of the fate of her husband she said fervently:

"Thank God!"

And once more did Butterfly Billy disappear mysteriously from the Overland.

But he went to his Texas home with his mother, and they were welcomed by Major Mabrey, who was as happy as a boy at their return.

"And Yankee Kit?" asked Butterfly Billy.

"Is still a prisoner in my home."

"Well, he told me the truth, and through it I found my mother, so let him go."

And Yankee Kit did go, and once more took to the life of a peddler.

As for the Giant General, he also returned to Ranch Eden with his wife, Sampson and Red Dog, and the latter developed into an Indian cowboy, while the negro became the Major Domo of the ranch, and not one of their neighbors ever suspected the eventful story of the lives of that strange quartette, so strangely linked together.

As for Butterfly Billy he accepted a lieutenantancy in the army, and two years after reaching Fort M— was ordered then on the staff of General Carter, for that officer had meanwhile been promoted.

Not long after the handsome young hero-officer made pretty Mattie Carter his bride, and resigning his commission returned to Texas to the home he loved so well, and where he would be near his mother, who had at last become Mrs. Martin Mabrey.

Thus did Butterfly Billy win his bonanza.

THE END.

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- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Cutlass; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Foe.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
- 411 The Silken Lasso; or, The Rose of Rauch Robin.
- 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter.
- 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
- 445 The City Vampires; or, Red Rolf's Pigeon.
- 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
- 499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
- 538 Dodger Dick, the Dock Ferret.
- 543 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
- 553 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
- 563 Dodger Dick, the Boy Vidocq.
- 575 The Two Shadows.
- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
- 594 Little Lon, the Street-Singer Detective.
- 610 Old Skinner, the Gold Shark; or, Tony Sharp on Guard.
- 626 The Champion Pards.
- 637 Dick Doan, the Dock Boy Detective.
- 645 Kit, the Pavement Sharp.

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